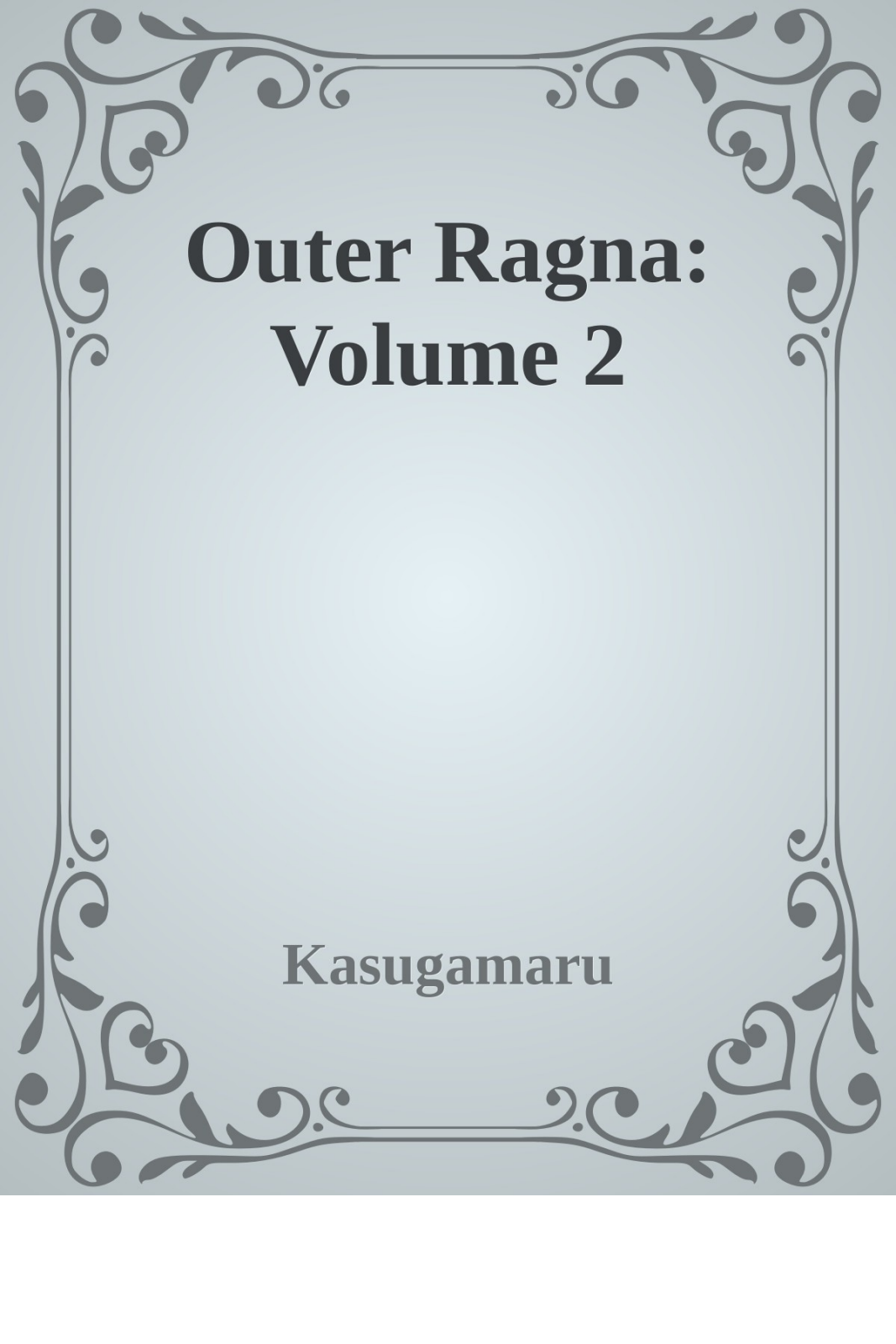


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the entire page.

Outer Ragna: Volume 2

Kasugamaru

VISIT...

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Outer Ragna

Kasugamaru

II



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39 Monologue

The air is thick with the heavy scents of clove and orange, accented by light cinnamon. It penetrates through my nose and into my brain as I take a tiny sip from the paper cup. I let the liquid spread evenly on my tongue, then swallow. Its sweetness is permeating.

Suddenly, I'm looking at trees. Perhaps my eyes are seeking the color green. I'm exhausted.

It seems exceedingly fitting that the discussion of a mission that could affect the very fate of the world would be held in such a meeting room. It's so quiet you could hear a speck of dust drop, and there are computers all around.

Dragon Demon RPG, huh?

That's the name of a video game released into beta by an unknown developer. Their plan seemed to be to release it in early access in order to build funds before launching a large-scale marketing campaign. Despite the bullish sales method, the game became quite popular in Japan.

The world has never seen a bigger computer virus.

It started by gaining control of customers' consoles and computers and using their collective processing power to completely take over the biggest cryptocurrency network with extreme speed and sophistication. It was most likely the work of an A.I. designed to attack such systems. This gave it control over the world's mining machines, increasing its processing power until it eventually had multiple super A.I. under its influence. And what did it do with the greatest amount of processing power in history, you ask?

It made this. The fantasy world displayed on the tablet screen; this map of a continent. At first glance, it seems like an in-game map, but it is completely different. This is reality, not fiction. It is the scene of the crime, as well as a battlefield. A world existing in a different space from ours. In other words, a parallel world. To meddle in such an absurd phenomenon and attempt to gain demonic powers... Only a criminal so heinous that even God Himself doesn't scare them would think of such a thing.

Perhaps I should call it a grand scheme to fool even God.

Whoever they are, they call themselves Demon God. They created the vampires, a monstrous alien species, and set about the barbaric task of exterminating the native species. It is difficult to describe just

how truly evil this is. Their ultimate goal is to threaten the world order... Something our country cannot allow.

I see blue. From the courtyard of the U.S. Department of Defense I look up at the sky, cut into a blue pentagon. I see white clouds, too. Blue and white. Beautiful. The same as the elves' national colors.

The elves. They are a native species, and intervene in this crisis with the full might of their republic. Not to mention their fair skin. Truly, they are the righteous dealers of justice. Guns and magic are different, of course, but their focus on long-range battles makes things quite convenient. They are a beautiful people too.

Uniting and educating them will give me my best chance of succeeding at my mission. With the Earth's network infected, anything else would be only temporary. It's too late to hope for any results from spreading around the "deluxe version," which is bundled with the anti-virus.

I suspect the Demon God is lurking somewhere in Eastern Europe. This is information I got by analyzing their signal-noise patterns—talk about hard-earned. The ex-communist bloc... Depending on how things go, there's the very real risk of a certain button being pushed, but for now, the situation is tolerable. By imitating the Demon God's strategies, I've pushed the elves and vampires into a struggle for supremacy. This mission has been years in the making, but my efforts are finally being rewarded. My connection instability has been getting better recently, as well. Then again, considering I've only been able to intervene once every decade or so of their time, it's quite astounding how easy things have been. I'd love to shower the IT department in champagne for it.

Wait, aren't they out at Ground Zero Cafe? I'll just raise my paper cup to them in respect. Heh. It's already lunch, huh? Let's use the peace and quiet to focus on the item of concern below me.

Just as we'd stabilized our connection, frequent "interference clouds" started cropping up. I should probably assume that the Demon God has gained the ability to smoothly intervene and create interference again. The proof is in how they've taken control of small groups of soldiers to cause havoc on the front lines. Vampires aren't capable of military tactics requiring such fine decision-making and direction. I managed to delay things by placing unique units in each area... I never in my wildest dreams imagined that would lead to the destruction of the vampires' strongest unit.

Golden. She was a master of lightning and earth magic; a fearsome combat resource. I couldn't believe my own eyes when she repelled Dragon all on her own. After that I gave up on trying to micromanage our resistance, instead focusing on controlling many things at a macro level in order to suppress her attacks. That was just

how much of a threat she was.

But who could have envisioned that Shield would kill Golden? Shield—Sakiel, a master of wind magic; a unique unit only useful for defense. She was so imperfect that I couldn't help but yell at her to get it together, although perhaps that was a blessing in disguise.

I sigh and take a sip of hot cider. Was it a bad move on their part, or a smart move on mine? I can't tell. And speaking of confusing... the humans. No, let's call them subhumans. They're natives that live on the southern tip of the continent, barely squeaking by. I was sure it was only a matter of time before they were wiped out.

So why did they start amassing forces in the north of their territory?

It would be understandable if they were gathering at the fort to the south—one could explain it as them fearing the aftermath of war—but they are doing completely the opposite. Their army is moving all the way to the northern fort, to the Frontier. Even if they end up standing there doing nothing, it could still stoke the territorial dispute. Could this have been triggered by our war with the vampires? Is this pitiful gathering of soldiers an attempt at brandishing their own strength?

No... it can't be. These subhumans are only good for watching us battle while they try to not die in the process. If anything, I should be focusing on this "treasure of our species" that the elven elder has identified. The subhumans must have some sort of ancestral tie like the elven Spirit Tree—something that can create events that would be called "miracles" even in a world full of magic.

Miracles...

It's only a miracle because it'll never happen. If it does, it becomes merely a phenomenon. Even this Parallel World War that we find ourselves in and the loss of the vampires' strongest unit were all born from accumulated phenomena. Nothing more. We must analyze, strategize, and take the best measures possible.

This feeling of hesitation doesn't come from nowhere, though. I hate to admit it, but I am forced to. It's fear. I'm afraid of going on the offensive. I'm practically shivering with fright. No matter how many strategy meetings we hold, in the end, there must be a hero who actually moves to action. The isolation of a meeting room is far too cold of an environment to reflect the horrors of this Parallel World War. Recovering from even the slightest of our mistakes takes a hundred years in their time. Now that the vampires have lost the greatest of their three unique units, the elves should go on a full-on offensive campaign... and yet...!

I swallow the last drops of my hot cider. Crushing the paper cup, I toss it at the trash can. Urgh, it's going to miss... wait, the wind's

correcting its trajectory... Yes! Score! The IT department cheers, and I wave at them.

Now, to head towards my lonely workplace. It's time to end this Parallel World War. Everything is for the sake of world order. For the sake of our country, above all. For the sake of good people all over the world.

I spin the handrims of my wheelchair in a gallant and cheerful manner. It doesn't matter if I'm only pretending, the wheelchair lift's right over there, after all.

40 About Repentance, Announcements, Elements, and Familiars in DDR

People are weak, but humans are strong.
That is why we challenge this world.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 1-

I'm not going to drink again until I win. Also, I'll be playing the repentance mini-game ten thousand times! Click, click.

Hey, all! PotatoStarch here. Like I said before, I've switched to video recordings. Man, I miss the days when people would comment "PotatoMasochist" and "Like, literally potato starch?" to which I'd respond: "Hell yes!" Ah, the banter. Without the live aspect of streaming, I'm just another no-name on the Internet.

Of course, you may be thinking, "Just livestream then, if you're going to complain." I'd love to, but unfortunately I can't. Claiming "personal reasons" is too cryptic, so I'll just be honest: if I weren't bound to secrecy, I'd be rushing to the police or the hospital.

Someone picked a fight with me.

I'm an expert at ignoring things, but even my blood is a little boiled by this. I can't tell you the details, but I'm seriously pissed at this mysterious bastard. Just you watch... I'll get the DDR happy end! And once I do, I'll make you regret crossing my path five thousand trillion times over, Romanian! All I have to do is what I've been doing all this time; I just have to focus on staying sober. I'll enjoy DDR to my heart's content. There. I'll play my heart out. There. This is the best. I'm a total grown-up, by the way.

Besides, even if this isn't live, it's still streaming. Once I decide to post the video, it's considered streaming. Oh, I thought of a title for this video. I'm sure you're all like, "At this point?" but with determination, I have an announcement to make... Drumroll, please...

This is a documentary! A documentary of the path to human victory and glory in DDR! What do you think of that? This strange feeling of pride is amazing. Just watch, I'll make good on my word!

Okay, that's enough hot-bloodedness for now. Time to dive in.

The situation on the Frontier is as you can see. Ten thousand soldiers are all in perfect sync thanks to Kuroi's flawless training exercises. What is this, the opening ceremony for the Olympics? Especially you, hot knight guy. I'm getting a major déjà vu from your moves. Such a sharp and exciting aura... Upside, inside out, he's livin' la vida loca. He's freaking Ricky Martin. And his two strong subordinates are like backup dancers. This is just a concert, man.

Things are going in a good direction, at least. Kuroi's only capable of patrols and training, but none of that government stuff. I mean, look at her stats. She's your stereotypical meathead. In any case, we've got to enrich the country and strengthen the army. The political part I'll leave to the NPCs.

Aaand that should do it. Good work, everyone. Kuroi's running so coolly to the next training area. Past the pastures, take a peek into the barn, through the residential area, and into the administrative district. Man, things have gotten so lively. The monster attacks are like a phantom of the past. People and products are flooding in; buildings and businesses are cropping up everywhere. No wonder the garrison is dancing salsa. Whoops, my brain's still in music mode.

Look, that billboard's for the adventurer's guild. They sure set up that outpost quickly. And right next to it is the sorcerer's guild outpost, perfectly positioned. Very convenient. Lots of other places are still under construction; this place is quickly becoming the Frontier Capital.

Everyone on the street has such good manners, they all greet Kuroi. Most nod, but some even get on their knees and start praying. Just walk past them regally, total Apostle move.

The Devil God's power is rising nicely, too. The bonus effects are starting to stack up. It's really exciting. At a base level, the humans have gotten more resistant to disease. They have a bonus to biological resistances. I'd assume their lifespan has extended as well. They also received a bonus to maximum stamina. Horses are now considered familiars, too. Nice.

Kuroi's summon magic, the most important thing combat-wise, is still far away, though.

I can at least add another servant. I'm currently searching for one, but it's not a huge priority. I was sure if it came down to it we could just create more Apostles... but that's not looking possible.

Perhaps the key to Apostles for each race is their elements. I'd never considered this before, but if it's true then a lot of things would make more sense. Well, it just confirms that humans get the short end of the stick, as usual.

The elven elements are wind and water. They get two. Sakiel, the Ten Thousand Bells, is a wind mage. The slender Deep Sea is, of course, a water mage. And the lead Apostle, Absolute, is a terrifying master of both elements. That old man scares me.

The vampire elements are lightning and earth. They get two as well. The sexy Thunderstorm is a lightning mage, the stony-faced Crumbling Mountain is an earth mage, and the Apostle Golden was a master of both.

It's sort of like blood types, you know? There's A type, B type, and AB type. When you think of it that way, the fact that humans only get the one element of fire... C'mon, development team...

But there's no point in begging for things that don't exist. We just have to win with what we've got. What we lack, we'll make up for in creativity, dedication, passion, time, and hard work... No big deal,

right?

Which is why I'm at the fire bomb station—hey, sorcerer, why are you running away? Not on my watch! See? Gotcha. Okay, Sira, tie this guy up. Fire mages, gather 'round! Ready your oil jars.

Today's training course is, once again, "Love Dance." One of the devs must really be into dancing. Just upload videos of yourself already.

Feeling the rhythm I click-click, click-click. More Indian-like! Don't forget to wink! Phew, perfect... I'll be back in the evening.

Oh? You want to come with me, Sira? Okay, we can patrol together. Let's head to the north gate. Gotta make sure the elves are behaving themselves. They are still our enemies, after all. We're only allies for a short while.

Wow, this place has certainly gotten wild. This isn't just a bit of gardening; they've made a lake. Moreover, everything that could possibly be considered a roof is being treated like their living room. And yet something's off. A strange vibe is going around. It's like everyone's nervous. There are hardly any elves or silver leopards, and the skyhawks are circling the sky to the north. Wait, are they preparing for war? Huh, seems like that's it. They have elves flying out on scouting missions. There's still plenty of daylight, so there shouldn't be any threat of a vampire attack... Hm? Are those monsters? They're shuffling... no, hopping out of a corner of the forest. Rabbits. Dark, monstrous rabbits with horns like blades.

Militant rabbits. And in the thousands.

Could this be...?

Kuroi, use Call on your war horse. Sira should be able to ride with you. Okay, now hurry. If we can make contact before the elves, we should be able to find out for sure!

Ah, I knew it. They're not attacking at all. In fact, they're raising their heads, laying their swordhorns on the ground... they're paying respect to us. Humbly, they intend to serve us.

It's a request to become familiars. They want to serve the Devil God. This is just like with the horses. The situation's a little too desperate to consider not taking them. There, the mark of a familiar has been placed under their stats. That means the Devil God's blessing is upon them. With it, these militant rabbits are pretty strong. Their strength stat is low, but their speed and skill stats are nice. They could make for a different type of front line unit, distinct from the silver leopards and black wolves.

I need a volunteer. You there, the panda-patterned one. I'm going to give you a very special duty. Click. There. You are now officially Sira's personal familiar. You need a name. Hmm... Considering your coloring and role, let's go with Shirokuro. That's black and white in

Japanese. You'll be Sira's helper. Yeah, good. I like it. This is another result of the massive rise in Devil God faith levels.

So, uhm... You can stop being on-guard now. Hello, elves? Well, it's the correct decision. Our new familiars are very dangerous to elves. They're faster than black wolves and most definitely your worst nightmares.

Still, the unease and nervousness they're emitting is so real it's making my heart race. DDR's A.I. is seriously next-level. It'd be a pro in chess.

Okay, make way already. We're taking these rabbits to the farms. You already have your silver leopards, skyhawks, lizards, and frogs. If you have power, you should consider it only natural that your opponent might also have the same power. That's called equality. Otherwise, you're just looking down on us. What, you think you're the only special ones? That's not the case, at least try to remember this. Not that there's any point in talking to an A.I.

41 The Captain Joins His Friend's Feast / Ten Thousand Bells Performs Her Best

We are not alone.

We have comrades at our sides and at our backs. Together, we look forward.

-Captain Zakkow I-

I'll make my living as a warmonger. That's what I decided on my fifteenth winter, and for nearly forty years I've lived steadfastly and unemotionally. I don't have a family; I don't want one. The urge dried up after seeing so many friends die on the battlefield. It's been a long time since my brow last furrowed. I was sure it had frozen in place.

"C-Captain! Captain Zakkow! Look! It's so fluffy!"

"They're actually pretty light when you hold them. But their hind legs are so thick!"

"Those long ears and twitching noses... they're so cute! Look, Captain!"

What a bother. How am I supposed to react at times like this? These men, who not too long ago were in a frenzy for vengeance, are now playing with rabbits like school children. I don't even know if I should be happy or scold them.

"Right. Be careful of their horns," I remind them. I realize this is a fairly boring thing to say, but I can't resist the urge. The militant rabbits have taken over one of the farms and are quietly eating their feed. Apparently they're now God's familiars and will fight alongside us humans.

However, these are monsters. Just yesterday, they were out for human blood. I didn't see any in the attack on the Hell Expanse, but they were definitely a part of the attack on the Frontier. I don't even need to check the newspaper's published accounts. Everyone's heard of someone who's been gored to death by those sharp horns.

"Why the long face, Captain?"

"Father Felipo!"

"As you were. I merely came to check on them as well."

The fence doesn't even creak from the weight of two large men

leaning on it from both sides. These are sturdy. The carpenters from the south are skilled and work quickly. All of our most important people and top supplies have come from the south. This man, too, definitely hails from there as well; from somewhere with a lot of political power.

Father Felipo, priest of the Frontier. He's been running the local government all by himself. The other man is Frontier Captain Agias, a warrior that relies quite heavily on Father Felipo's insight. This priest likes to talk a lot, and the manner of words he uses makes it quite obvious that he's from a noble background. He might be from a really powerful family. The bravery and spirit he showed in the battle not too long ago were no less than extraordinary. He's no mere scholar or holy man.

"My, familiars are such strange beasts... I had some inkling that this might happen, so I had started making preparations, but..."

"It is quite impressive indeed that you considered the possibility of allying with monsters," I remark.

"According to the holy book, 'God exists in all His grace, and will appoint an Apostle. Even monsters will obey them,'" he recites.

"God, Apostles, familiars... This is like straight out of a legend."

"Up until now we have only been working off statements of hearsay. It was the clergy's job to make people believe, and these words were more like a temporary consolation for those who did have faith. However, now everything has come true. We are truly living in a legend," he spouts happily. I'd thought that all members of the church were good people who lied, but this man is the exact opposite. He's a terrible, honest person. "A legend... it's impossible to describe with logic and words how moving this is." He smiles widely. It's practically infectious. "Also, who could have thought that these critters would be so distinct!"

That's true, militant rabbits are quite easy to tell apart. Even I can spot the differences. That gray one has sharp eyes and a detached demeanor, while that brown one is baby-faced and pudgy. The one next to it is female, I think. This one over here is truly dignified. I can tell these things just by looking at them. Normally, I would never have been able to distinguish them. You could call it the results of God's blessing and be done with it, but this... this seems a little different. My chest feels hot. The reason?

"It's because... they're our allies," I mutter.

"Indeed. Yes, that is exactly correct. Lord Willow said the same thing in regards to the horses."

"I see. Then perhaps we can become friends on the battlefield." As I speak, I realize that the rabbits are not paying us any mind, nor can they offer us a handshake. We can't even have a simple conversation.

But I believe. We're the same, them and us. Drawn in by the "heat" of this land, we were both brought here by the same energy.

"We are different beings. Naturally, everything about us is different."

"But we can co-exist," I add.

"Indeed. As long as we respect each other, I'm sure we can live together. We can both enjoy prosperity. We do not need to be exactly the same; we only need to accept each other's differences in order to cultivate harmony."

"Is that rationality speaking?"

"No, it is sincerity. The only political tie we truly need is the one with the elves. With these little ones we must be bonded through honor, as comrades experiencing the same troubles." This man must be made of stern stuff to not praise God at this point. It's something our local leadership shares, especially Lady Kuroi, who is the personification of our faith. We were not saved from the depths of despair by God, no. We are not His playthings, His toys. The unreasonableness of living has caused us no end of pain and suffering; we became accustomed to giving in. Even so, we had our pride for surviving thus far.

But no one can live in wretchedness forever.

God gave us the fire to face our troubles and save ourselves with our own hands. He gave us hope, so that we might keep moving forward. All we needed to do was make up our minds. The same goes for these rabbits. That's why they've gathered here. I see. We are comrades; brothers in arms.

"By the way, I heard you shared some of your insight with Lord Willow about the garrison infantry," comments the father.

"I did. I've seen them first-hand, after all."

"I am your commanding officer, and my second-in-command is Captain Jashan son Peine. As for you, Zakkow, I need your assistance in many things as squad captain."

"I believe that is the best way to fight, sir." Unity is everything for the infantry. Without it, no one would be brave enough to set foot on the battlefield. Because your comrades are by your side, you can fight the fear. Wrestle with it, suppress it, force it out.

"The best way to fight? Heh. The infantry will be joined by the rabbits, just as the cavalry work with horses."

"Yes, that sounds very reassuring," I respond.

"We must deepen our friendship with each other."

"Of course."

"So... you know what must be done, yes?"

"I do, sir." There's no hiding the looseness in our cheeks, the wriggling of our fingers in excitement.

“Let us dive in, then!”

“Yes, sir!”

I too will touch the fluffy tail. It’s part of our war, after all.

-Sakiel, the Ten Thousand Bells I-

I sip my tea beneath the blue skies. The warm liquid and scent slip down my throat and into my chilled breast.

“Lady Sakiel, that... Those are...”

“Yes. They have taken the militant rabbits as familiars.” No matter how many times I witness it, I am always thoroughly impressed by God’s quiet, transcendental power. A monster’s only purpose is to belch that stench, a poisonous gas that’s like a mixture of hatred and rot brewed together... and yet a refreshing breeze is blowing over the farmlands. The laws of Nature have been twisted. For better or worse, the world has surely been altered.

“Are you scared, Fleilyu?”

“Honestly speaking, I feel a great unease,” she responds after a pause.

“Because the humans are growing strong?”

“Yes. Their strength seems to build up before my very eyes. It seems almost endless.”

“Hm... your expression says you’re thinking about how to fight against them.”

“How can I not be alarmed by a power that struck down the Golden?”

“You have a point. That was quite the spectacle.” That army, burning red and black... summoning magic that brought the dead back to fight at the front lines endlessly... What Kuroi showed the world that day was the true meaning of the horrors of war.

It’s so sad. The fighting only increases in intensity, but it is my belief that people simply want to get along and smile together.

“Fleilyu, please report this to the Council in great detail,” I command.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And if I may add something, the beauty of one’s coat knows no high or low social status. I would love to pet those black wolves, too. Alive, of course. Don’t send me any skins.”

“Th-That was...” she splutters.

“And in regards to Arcsem’s successor, please insist they send someone of much calmer temperament. We cannot have the same thing happen again.”

“Of course. I’ll be on my way, then.”

Now, how will this turn out? I can only hope she does well. Even

Fleilyu, who has interacted with and learned much about humans, is scared of them. I can only imagine what the Council must be feeling, only hearing second-hand accounts. I pray no extremist views come into play.

The root of unease and fear is ignorance and misunderstanding, after all. Besides, who's weaker or stronger is no longer relevant.

The Dragon and Demon Gods have been fighting for three hundred years, ever since the vampires appeared. In this world, it's your mental state that is of most importance. Otherwise, mere existence is just wretched.

Hm... perhaps I shall hold another concert. Music for the people. I'll have Jellyfish Bells and Sunfish Gongs dance in the sky as the smoke from lunch fires rises into the air. A bright song, performed with a positive attitude and a light heart.

So that the people might remember that this world is wonderful. This is the best I can do.

42 The Captain Works in Disguise for the Sake of Entrusted Hope

Fire is in my heart. It burns deep within.
I know that this fire connects us all.

-Captain Jashan son Peine I-

“Yes. Yes, that’s right. I am unsatisfied with the way things are run on the Frontier,” I declare, rubbing my belly, even though it doesn’t hurt. As I speak, a mustachioed gentleman nods happily. “I am the captain of the northern lands. It may not compare to the Frontier Army, but my authority is at least equal to a newly appointed Minister of War. So why in the world was I stationed in an infantry platoon? Are they calling me a disposable pawn, not even worthy of a horse? And what is this vice-captain business? My commanding officer is a priest? Do they wish me to die?” Rumbblings of agreement echo about, but none of them truly understand. When one wants to believe something, it appears as the sweetest nectar, yet sweetness is the best way to hide poison. Back in seminary, we used to mix laxatives in with sweet tea.

“The supplies and reinforcements requested from the fort are suspect, as well,” I continue. “Talk about excess. You could be in league with the merchant on some massive fraud scheme. There’s also the Willows... they treat the cavalry like their own personal soldiers. They could be plotting some kind of coup.” Upon hearing the surname “Willow,” some pitch forward. Which means I should be able to narrow down my suspect to one of the noble conservatives. Let’s close the net tighter. “This hierarchy makes no sense.” Oh, it seems I’ve hit the nail on the head. I’ve got enough information to be sure now. Time to finish things.

“Don’t you agree? Power should follow tradition and customs in order to be used properly. I am merely concerned that this refusal to invite the appropriate person from the capital means there is something rotten afoot.” I grimace and hang my head. Yes, yes, thank you for your concern. Come again. Next time, however, I suspect there will be quite some arguing. For the various rotten lords and nobles of the capital, deciding on a representative is the same as giving away authority.

Next on the agenda is... a drink of water, I think. I ring the servant bell.

Thank you for the pitcher, my lady. I'll be sure to increase your wages generously. After all, not only is she attending to the needs of others, she's also helping me obtain secret information.

"Yeesh! They're finally gone. You call that a visit to the sick? Don't make me laugh. The central dignitaries seem to have no idea what is going on below them... they don't understand the reality of the Frontier," I complain. I find it difficult to get behind tricking someone who's lost their family, though. "They should just send the coins and supplies already. We've already got the soldiers. My friends from the fort came, after all." But I guess it can't be helped if my spy is an anti-elf. These are the types that harbor grudges against society.

"Honestly, I hate their long ears and white faces. Who do they think they are, hanging around here? Someone should set fire to the northern gate area and be done with it." See? I'm a convenient person, so just put your radical destructive plans on hold until I can do my thing.

I sympathize, of course. The betrayal at the northern gate... Their family was killed by elves. It must hurt. I can only imagine the suffering. They probably hate anyone who looks even the least bit happy.

"Oh, I hate them, too. But their medicine, at least, is top-notch. It really heals you quickly," I respond. I sympathize, but... this is war. It's not something so simple that can be solved with pure hate, nor are we strong enough to take on the elves and the vampires at the same time. We must utilize what is available to us as efficiently as possible. Anyone empty-headed enough to claim that they don't care about our circumstances is just a hindrance. It is truly unfortunate.

So, come on, take my information and back down, please.

Now, what next... oh? Look who's here.

"Yo, fort guy. Still got you doing dirty work, I see."

"Greetings, younger Willow. I smile with my face, but cry in my heart." Good timing. Just as I had planned. This young knight may appear rough, but he is quite considerate. It must have been his good upbringing. "I'd rather be busy with military drills and negotiations. It's quite vexing."

"Oh, funny. What's so amusing about wrapping bandages on something that doesn't require it?"

"Any situation can be enjoyed depending on your schemes."

"So you're slathering fake medicine on? Doesn't that get boring?"

"Ah, you don't understand. It can be quite... stimulating to have a lady wrap your bandages."

"Well, as long as you're enjoying yourself."

I'm worried, even though I say everything's fine. It's true that I am the only survivor of the three hundred cavalry I brought from the fort, but that doesn't mean I wish to die. I have so much left to do first.

"So, did you bring what I requested?" I ask.

"Here. Careful how you handle it, though." Hidden amongst the basket of fruits, wine, and dried meat are fire bombs and an ignite canister.

"My, my... it's quite heavy."

"You can go ahead and fill them with mana, but don't accidentally ignite them. The range and firepower are difficult to understand unless you've experienced them yourself."

"Yes, I'll be careful. Is work on the mass production going smoothly?"

"It's okay. The people from the Hell Expanse are starting to fabricate them."

"Oh, that is good to hear. Carefully packed in boxes and delivered here... there's no way anyone would believe that."

"Ugh, that excited smile. No wonder you and the priest get along."

"I also get along with your younger brother. He read me one of his poems the other day."

"Marius... I wish I didn't, but I understand. You two really seem like you'd see eye to eye."

"Perhaps a certain other brother should also recite some poetry. Even a sword dance would be fine."

"A sword dance? That's more Agias's thing."

"I'm quite adept at clapping along with the rhythm. Go on, start."

"No way. You want me to perform a sword dance for your recovery? Are you crazy?"

I think it would be fun. This conversation is enjoyable enough, though. After the younger Willow leaves, I'm still smiling. A bit of a refresher really lightens the mood. I chow down on the dried meat and take a swig of the wine. Then I practice my magic.

I close my eyes. Sharpening my mind, I seek the bottom of the darkness. There's nothing to be scared of. Black is the color of Lady Kuroi. Deep within, I can see hints of red. It's small but burns red hot, waiting for the moment to ignite.

Lady Kuroi's fire. Ever since that day, it's been inside me as well. And my men—the men I brought with me from the fort are there now, too. When the time comes, I shall hasten to join them in Lady Kuroi's grace. Good. Very good. What a wonderfully delightful job.

Just you wait. I'll join you eventually. And it won't be just me. Many people will be turned into flames. There's no telling how many infernos will burn. That's the scale of the war we're waging. The flames will roar with the souls of the people scattered by the war.

I will not allow hatred to be everything. If it all ends as simply pent-up grudges, that won't be any fun at all. Why even bother to exist at that point? It'd be easier to just die. Talk about depressing. I want to say goodbye to this world with a big smile on my face.

Hope. We need hope. One can die with pride when there is hope, regardless of whether it's passed on to someone else or not. Right, men? I'm right, aren't I? I failed to die, but that's how I feel. Your hope shines beautifully even now. As the survivor, I must do my job perfectly and transform it into something tangible. I have to make some sort of progress.

In my mind, hope doesn't flash periodically in the sky; that wouldn't be something you could reach with your hands. No matter how far away it is, it has to exist somewhere on this continent.

It exists. It must. Lady Kuroi is leading the way, so I'm sure it exists.

"Fort guy!"

Oh, the younger Willow is back. Shoot. I couldn't focus on my magic at all. I blame you, my men. Why are you suddenly so good at listening?

"What is it, younger Willow? Your feathers seem ruffled."

"Come to the church right this instant! Keep pretending to be injured, I don't care! I'll put you on a wagon!"

"My, my... what's happened?" With a government in place, we've been holding meetings in the church's office. Only the top leaders are invited. Our discussions mainly concern extremely pressing matters. But my information network hasn't picked up on anything that would trigger this reaction. In other words, it's not an internal threat. And the anti-elf people didn't seem off, nor looked suspicious, so it can't be them. In other words...

"The vampires!"

Yes, the vampires. However, this is quite sudden. And he came galloping on his fastest horse. Whatever happened, it was enough to send even a Willow man into a panicked state.

"They've made a final declaration of war! They're going to wipe out elves and humans alike!"

Ah, I see. I see... Did you hear that, men? Summon your pride. Your efforts in the previous battle had truly earth-shaking results. This land has finally been acknowledged as a great battlefield between three tribes. We humans are now on the stage.

Here is where it starts. Yes, it all begins now. Right at this moment, we are truly standing on the path to hope. All that's left is to work desperately towards our goal, even if it means death.

"Good! Now go forth, younger Willow! Make this wagon fly!"

"You got it! Hold on tight!"

“Why, such enthusiasm. I like it!”

Men, I hope you’re excited. We shall soon fight a great battle together. We shall soon burn like an inferno.

43 The Merchant Looks Out and Prays for the World After the Final Battle

Our prayers reach God.

Through me, God responds to His people's requests.

-Merchant Ange I-

The Frontier leaders fill the small office, making it uncomfortable even to breathe: Acting Frontier Commander Agias Willow, Frontier Priest Felipo, Frontier Sorcerer Odysson, Northern Commander... something-Pine, Cavalry Captains Origis and Marius Willow, and me, Frontier Master of Coin. With all these people gathered together, you know the topic of discussion is going to be anything but pleasant.

The chatty fatty's face is completely solemn, while the chatty bandaged one is smiling. That just confirms it. They must be about to reveal something terrible. Whatever the bad news is, they are surely going to test our very limits.

"The time has come." Acting Commander Willow's voice rumbles heavily. It's as if he's telling us to prepare for the worst. "The vampires have declared war on both the elves and us. This will be the final battle. In the name of the Rorangia Holy Empire, they say they will 'subjugate this land and drive out the infidels...' no, perhaps they've already begun."

A map of the continent is spread out before us. Each area of control is marked by a distinct color. The east and west are predominantly black and white, with a tiny speck of red to the south; as if trying to shove reality into our faces.

"Many of the outlying towns to the west have been attacked and taken over," he continues. "Individually, they don't seem like much, but taken all together, it is quite a large-scale assault. It's quite likely they will proceed to attack the fort as well. We also have reports that they are simultaneously employing this large-scale tactic on the elves." He places a small black pawn on the western corner of the red section. To the north, where the black and white sections intersect, he places a large black pawn and... a large white pawn. Of course. "According to their declaration of war, the invasion army headed

toward the elves is led by Thunderstorm. In response, the elves will most likely send an Apostle of their own. We cannot say for sure whether it will be Absolute or Deep Sea, but Ten Thousand Bells seems out of the question.” As he speaks, he places a large white pawn on the north section of the red area. That’s the elven girl, isn’t it? “Ten Thousand Bells will not move from here, as she herself has declared. We believe the defeat of Golden on this land is part of the reason for her decision. That’s the end of my report.”

Did someone just swallow audibly? It can’t have been me, I was careful to keep it quiet. It doesn’t matter, really; it could have been all of us. War, huh? This battle will be on a scale unlike any before it; surely the whole continent will be dragged into it.

I knew this time would come. Killing monsters, refusing to bow to the elves, fighting back against the vampires, worshiping God, following an Apostle, killing the Golden, refusing to die... and instead attempting to live with glory. It was only natural that this would happen.

Even so, it doesn’t stop the shivering. It doesn’t change the fact that this is terrifying. Military tactics are like a foreign language to me, so I cannot tell who or what is winning, or even predict what might come next. Nevertheless, there is one thing I *do* know: humanity is backed into a corner. And there is no way for us to escape.

Within the red section on the map, there are some semblances of a frontline and a backline. The Frontier, which encompasses the fort on three sides, is considered a danger zone, while the capital to the south is a safe haven... or at least that’s the common conception. The nobility and the poor live together in this narrow land, clinging together for dear life.

However, this safety is only temporary. If the vampires wanted to, they could destroy the fort in an instant. No, they could obliterate it and leave not a single trace behind. That’s reality—the cold-hearted reality that surrounds us.

“Allow me to add one thing,” Father Felipe pipes up. I doubt it’s going to be anything positive. “Normally, the vampires would submit their announcement in the name of one of their three Apostles. They followed this convention when signing the Baltrial Treaty. While the elves invoked the Ewlogond Republic, the vampires entered into the treaty under the name of their lead Apostle, Golden.” Such extensive knowledge... that’s not something one would know without specifically digging for it. I doubt he learned it at seminary. How long has this man been planning for war? “But now they’ve invoked the name of the Rorangia Holy Empire. This is quite alarming. There is only one other instance where they did this, and that was when they founded their country. In other words, it’s the first time since the war

that suddenly brought them to power as described in the holy book.”

Some history? No, more like a fairy tale. About three hundred years ago, on a full-moon night, the vampires suddenly appeared. Led by the Demon God, they wiped out the thunderous insectors, then proceeded to jump into the war between the elves and the dwarves. This is how they rose to power as the strongest tribe on the continent... or so the story goes. Heh heh. Whatever, that has nothing to do with us, who live in the present.

This great revolution that began in the Frontier is what legends are *truly* made of.

“We should take their statement of a ‘final battle’ quite literally,” continues the priest. “In other words, it will be a full-on offensive involving the entire nation. What I’m trying to say is...” Slowly, like watching a tiny crack become a gaping chasm, a smile forms on his face. “The perfect opportunity for our revolution has arrived.”

I thought he might say that. Captain What’s-his-name’s smile is so wide it’s about to fly off his face. How annoying. Odysson must agree with me, because he’s smirking as well. Acting Commander Willow and Captain Marius are grinning lightly, while Captain Origis and Captain Zakkow are beaming like they’re invincible.

“Yes! Clashing head-on with full strength! It’s not like we were ever in a position to hold back anyway. Not only are our forces weak, but they also lack stamina. Plus, no matter how much time we were given, there’d be no hope of uniting the country... humanity is already on the brink of annihilation,” remarks Father Felipo.

He has a point; we surpassed our limits long ago. The northern reaches might be wartorn and barren, but in the south people’s hearts have rotted into oblivion. Parents sell the flesh of their children, while children sell the bones of their parents... no matter how many times I experience it, my hand still shakes when I give them money in exchange. Same thing when I give the vampires their product: I shiver and shake, but no tears come out. Meanwhile, from their mansions above the back alleys, the nobles enjoy their feasts.

It’s a nightmare. To humans, it’s a nightmare. Chased into a corner due to weakness, smeared in wretchedness, and treating wine and women like the peak of culture... it sickens me. Naive logic like “slow but steady” won’t work anymore.

“If the vampires are bringing their full might to bear, then naturally the elves will follow suit. For the first time, an opening will present itself... we shall stake our all-or-nothing decisive battle on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We are weak and have short lifespans; this is the only option available to us,” concludes the priest excitedly.

Heh heh. Talk about crazy. And these adults, who somehow survived until today, are all smiling naturally. Ah... the image of a

certain absent someone appears in my mind—the profile of that raven-haired girl.

“Essentially, we will be focusing on defense and hit-and-run tactics,” states Acting Commander Willow as he places two new red pawns on the map. “Our main force of Origis’s two thousand cavalry, Felipo’s two thousand foot soldiers, and Odysson’s one thousand magic soldiers will be positioned here, in the northern Frontier. Felipo will be their commander. Maintain a defensive position, and if the situation calls for it, send soldiers out to nearby areas.” Hmm... considering the need for diplomacy with the elves, Father Felipo has to stay here. However, to station two impulsive and straightforward men with him... “We will then dispatch Marius’s two thousand cavalry and Zakkow’s two thousand foot soldiers to the Hell Expanse as a side army. Jashan will be their commander. Support the locals in their defense, but remain flexible.”

Ah, I see. So that’s it. How calculating. Acting Commander Willow has no intention of defending the Hell Expanse to the death. If things take a turn for the worse, he wants them to pull out and preserve their soldiers. At the very least, the cavalry should make it back. And he’s dispatching the perfect people for the job. The impulsive ones have a tendency to let their emotions get the better of them, after all.

Captain Zakkow seems to understand this; he nods resolutely. Yes, that’s the correct response. The time spent waiting for an opening is worth ten thousand gold, and the soldiers reserved for the final battle will be equally valuable. Inevitably, there will be sacrifices. That’s the sort of battle we’re entering into.

“I will lead a force of a thousand cavalry in hit-and-run tactics going west,” concludes the knight.

Heh. Heh heh... that face. The light in those eyes. I could fall for you right here, Agias Willow. You intend to take on the most dangerous role and clash with our enemies using a thousand of our most elite cavalry. Yes, you are certainly not holding back. Your stout resolution and self-confidence are blinding. You plan to fight on the front lines, survive by any means necessary, and then command our armies in the final battle... what an amazing man.

“One last thing: we must be wary of the Apostles’ movements.” Father Felipo tries to gather the large black and white pawns in his fat hand, but they fall out. Just leave them be then, man. He can be an idiot at the weirdest times. Stop copying him, Captain What’s-your-name... hey, you’re pretty good at that.

“Ahem. Where will the vampires’ Crumbling Mountain appear? Where will the elves’ Absolute and Deep Sea be positioned? The true battle begins once we understand the Apostles’ locations. Until then, please don’t do anything rash,” warns Father Felipo. He picks up a

large red pawn. "In this way, we shall do all that we can." The lone large red pawn. The symbol of our hope. "And we shall await a divine revelation..." he recites, placing the pawn reverently onto the side of the map, "...from the hand of God."

It's as if he's challenging and praying to God at the same time. Everyone closes their eyes. I follow suit and pray.

I pray that our precious wish for a future where humanity can exist proudly comes true. I pray that that means our victory. I pray that if it means defeat, the sacrifices we shall make are not too great. I pray that in exchange, many get to enjoy that happy future. I pray so that one day we can be happy that children are born. I pray for a wonderful world, where parents can watch their children grow.

"Deus Ex," we chant. Now, our final battle has begun.

44 About Drops in DDR / The Cavalry Fights Alongside the Raven- Haired Knight

The world that God perceives is the world that I perceive.
Humanity's sadness is cold, and its anger hot. That is our world.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 2-

Today the news was so scary that I can't even laugh. A nuclear-powered submarine vanished without a trace.

Hey guys, it's PotatoStarch! The world sure is dangerous, but I'm still here making war in my video games, wearing my bright red tracksuit from middle school, and chowing down on a piece of toast. Another peaceful day in Japan... right? Well, not really, but whatever. I have to focus on DDR.

We've entered the final battle phase. The trigger for this event is the vampires losing one of their Apostles, so it's only natural that it happens now. Although it's quite rare for them to lose Golden; most of the time it's Crumbling Mountain that is killed by Absolute. That makes Crumbling Mountain seem weak, and the strategy sites call it a "basically a guaranteed event" and "the internal administration ending its turn." However, it's really just a matter of bad chemistry. For example, if we were to take Thunderstorm and Absolute, who are now clashing heavily in the center of the continent... wait, why do I know that? There are so many markers on the map; I can't check their forces' numbers or stats, but just knowing their positions is a huge advantage. Hmm... just looking at this makes me feel uneasy.

There are no markers for the other Apostles. That's normal. Not even for Sakiel. Do they only show up during battle? But there was nothing during the battle with Golden... Hm... let's put a pin on this. For now, they're far away. Those two are destined to be in a long-distance stalemate anyway.

This is what I mean by "chemistry" between Apostles. Sakiel would defeat Thunderstorm with ease, but would be absolutely destroyed by Crumbling Mountain. Physical melee fighters are scary. Not to mention it would basically be a muscled-out man chasing after a little girl. Uh, yeah... gotta be really careful. In the end, how the Apostle battles turn out greatly affects our chances of victory.

Incidentally, if the first Apostle to drop out is from the elven side, the final battle phase isn't triggered. Instead, the vampires get very cocky. This leads to the elves getting desperate and almost enslaving the humans. They don't just make them a vassal state, oh no. The men are sent to the front lines as human shields while the children are fed to their familiars. It's truly horrific. But the most savage thing of all is that the elves get wiped out eventually, too.

Ha ha ha! DDR is such bullshit, isn't it? But we all knew that already.

I'm so glad I didn't have Kuroi side with the vampires. Remember

that tusk bonus I received after skewering the sherboa during the first monster wave? I still have it equipped. If I'd offered it to the Demon God as I'd planned... well, it certainly wouldn't have been funny.

Dragon Demon DX. Not Deluxe, but DX.

What it stands for, I have no idea... all my searching resulted in nothing—in fact, some even called me an idiot in the process. Whatever, I swear I'll make this final battle end in a victory for the humans! Which is why, Kuroi, I need you to learn Summon magic! Normal tactics won't beat the Demon God. I don't even know how to defeat her. However, in this DX version, a Devil God exists. Fight fire with fire, and a god with a god. I have no choice but to double down on this. In order to win, Summon magic, one of the strongest types, is an absolute must. Once that's unlocked, I can aim for even more power.

And! And! The way to strengthen her skills is to just kill vampires. Not that fending them off is an easy feat, but in two ways, this is a great chance to grant power to the Devil God.

First, it's an opportunity to increase Kuroi's fame as a martial artist. In that way, I can spread the results of the strengthened religious structure I created here in the Frontier. It's missionary work. Evangelizing through battle.

Second, it's a chance to steal faith points from the Demon God. When vampires are defeated, they drop ash and pebbles. Those pebbles are important. Like the leaf decorations of the elves, the pebbles contain the power of the Demon God's blessing. I'll offer those to the Devil God, turning them into "Devil God tokens."

In other words, they are experience points. I feel a bit awkward calling them by that old standby of video games, but I'll take it. I've got to do all I can. The method is the same regardless of the god, so no worries on that front. And as part of the battlefield tradition, the Church has taken custody of all the pebbles dropped so far.

That reminds me, we haven't collected the pebble from Golden yet. Of course, Kuroi lost consciousness back then, but it's still a mystery how we lost it. Then again, when it comes to Apostles and their servants, their blessings end up being inherited by someone else, so it wouldn't have been some game-breaking power. It's just a little annoying.

Anyway, that's how it is. So hurry up and go to the next battlefield, Mr. Hot Knight and company. Defeat as many vampires as you can and show the world just how strong and cool we are! Together! More, more!

-Knight Agias I-

A black knight sweeps across the plains, swords in both hands. Atop her steed, she looks like a raven stretching its wings. Lady Kuroi, are you planning on diving head-first into that mass of five hundred vampire soldiers? Then I shall shave away at their outer perimeter, fighting for no one but myself and my own fame.

I raise my hand above my head and show five fingers. I flex them once, then bring my arm down. A thousand cavalry split into five platoons. With the high speed of two hundred cavalry, they control the battlefield.

Then we watch the fury of Lady Kuroi.

Surrounded on all sides by malice, she unfalteringly charges forward. Lightning and boulders hurtle towards her, but reddish black shadows shield her as she races forward. The rest is a chaotic dance. Infernos shoot up with every flash of Lady Kuroi's dual blades. Shrieks echo and ash flies through the air.

Her black horse fears no vampire. It bears down upon enemy after enemy, almost as if enacting a violent dance itself. And they're not alone. Red-black shadows appear to fight alongside them.

Strong. Lady Kuroi is strong. She's stronger than she was before, and she's still trying to get even stronger. Lady Kuroi, what is it that you seek to destroy after throwing yourself without conceit into your training? What is stronger than Golden? The Demon? The Dragon? Or possibly... No, more like...

It is awe-inspiring. An Apostle's presence is heroic beyond comparison. She is still just a human, of course, so she performs reckless actions and suffers wounds, but... it's as if her duty is to become a blade.

We cannot lag behind, then. There is no honor or glory in letting our great leader fight alone. I flash a hand signal—bending my thumb, I sweep it through the air. Two hundred cavalry split into four groups. Fifty cavalry become a single sword. All along the perimeter, my men follow suit, forming twenty small blades. The vampires, forced to pay attention to Lady Kuroi, are easily shredded. Sharply and swiftly, we exterminate them. From the inside, a raging inferno; from the outside, twenty rings of fire. We will not let these beasts, too used to tyrannizing the weak, escape.

Five hundred vampires destroyed and turned into ash... and not a single man lost. Lady Kuroi is unharmed, as well. Now, she begins her usual rounds. She's been doing this ever since we started our hit-and-run tactics. She patrols the battlefield, her feet turning white with ash. She seems to be trying to find something, and refuses to get on her horse.

Another step. Yet another step. What is going on? In this way, she descends even further into—no, ascends the stairs to glory.

I send out scouts, set up patrols, and have those who will be resting here do maintenance on their horses and equipment. We cannot let our guard down, but we can take a small breather. We have been in dozens of battles so far.

The horrors of the western side of the Frontier are almost too much to bear. Based on messages alone, it would be impossible to estimate just how deeply the vampires have invaded our territory. The liberated towns were all ravaged beyond repair... they are unrelenting savages.

The five hundred vampires we just defeated were the largest force in the area. This should buy us the time we need to evacuate the citizens, but regardless, the situation is unsettling. The vampires' actions were extremely systematic. Normally, considering their beastly nature, one would expect them to attack humans in a more scattered fashion. Such highly coordinated tactics...

Furthermore, the expected follow-up to multiple invasions by smaller forces would be to charge clean up with a larger force, yet there's no trace of a great army approaching. Are they just testing the waters? Or perhaps disturbing the frontlines to see how we react? If that was it, then their retreat tactics really need some work. We have Lady Kuroi's power—what's the point in having all of their forces destroyed? In fact, I don't believe they have the strength to attack the fort any longer.

What is the vampires' goal? Until we find that out, our hit-and-run strategy will not end. Hm, Lady Kuroi has gotten onto her horse.

"Wait a second—" I was going to suggest we eat.

"Mmgh?" Something fills her cheeks. A dried potato? Lady Ange must have given it to her. Whoa, she's stuffing another one in.

"Be sure to chew well. Those can sit heavy in the stomach," I warn her after a pause. She nods and speeds up her mastication, then tilts back her water flask. Finally, she swallows. What a strange way to eat.

Her dark steed's horseshoes echo against the ground. The wind tosses her raven hair. In her eyes, two fires burn as she looks at me.

No, these battles are not ending yet. I understand. If it is your next enemy you seek, then I shall lead you to them.

God positioned Lady Kuroi not on the Frontier or the Hell Expanse, but here on the western front. Perhaps I should think more about what that means.

I set off, my horse cantering forwards. On to the next battlefield. And then the next battlefield.

45 MP Control in DDR / The Girl Volunteers to Spread the Word

If I could describe God's presence, it would be like a bonfire that lights up one's back.

Warm, reassuring, bright... and popping every now and again.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 3-

I thought my company called, but it was just someone trying to sell me cryptocurrency. They were really enthusiastic and suspicious.

Hey everyone, PotatoStarch here. My motto is to work hard without shortcuts. Even in games, this doesn't change. Vampire hunting with the hot knight and his men! Scouting the land for every last one! I'm the type that likes to clear every last enemy marker from the map in Dynasty Warriors games. Full steam ahead!

Then again, monster hunting games are not my thing. It was too hard for me to even hunt the herbivore family in the tutorial. They cry when you hit them! Just, no.

But when humans hunt vampires it doesn't pain my heart, which is lucky. They treat humans like food, after all. They remind me of raiders in post-apocalyptic games, or hunters in creature crisis games. It feels great to beat them.

Sorry, I know I'm going on and on about other games. I must be tired from playing DDR for so long. My PC is in perfect condition as usual, though. Phew, another town freed. Kill vampires, save the townspeople about to be enslaved or used for food, direct them to evacuate, and it's mission clear. All towns get abandoned. I mean, they're soaked in blood and covered in ash now.

Even if it's a game, it still pains my heart to see parents being eaten as they defend their children. Honestly, this is why people call the devs a criminal organization—by “people” I mean the PTA, the online purists, and the American Army. It's common among DDR fans to jokingly say, “Why?” to the last one. Seriously, why?

I guess the hot knight and his boys are going to be saving towns for a while. I'll have them on auto and let Kuroi rest to recover her MP. Frequent breaks are the key to success. In our previous event battle, she ended up in trouble because of her lack of stamina and inability to continue fighting. However, that's also the reason Kuroi was able to defeat Golden, by taking advantage of the enemy Apostle's manaless state. It's tough to say whether Summon Daemon would have ended it all.

In that respect, traveling with the cavalry makes Kuroi near invincible. They're fast and strong, so it's easy for her to recover mana. They even receive supplies every now and again.

Now then, how's observation mode going... still unstable, huh? I'm so used to this. I guess I'll take this opportunity to check in on other locations. Heh heh heh! This is my chance to use a system I've never used before.

By that, I mean servant view.

It's literally a system that allows you to spectate your servants in third-person... probably. I haven't used it, so I'm a bit nervous. I've never played as an Apostle before! The closest I ever got was a servant to an elven Apostle. It was an unbearable job full of crunch, so I died quickly. Absolute is really scary.

Click. Oh, I changed views. Sira's sure eating a lot of udon. Wait, this isn't the Frontier. Where is she... oh? The fort? When did she move there? Aw, and she's got her rabbit companion Shirokuro with her.

Oh, Sira's looking around. So cute. Now she's suddenly walking. Ha ha, she's carrying Shirokuro on her back! It's like one of those cartoon backpacks. Down the fort's hall she goes to... the chapel? Some business to attend to after dinner?

-Sira I-

Shirokuro twitches on my back. I know why, too.

It's because God has arrived. God is right here, watching us. It's okay. That doesn't mean something's happened to Lady Kuroi. God doesn't seem to be angry or sad. Maybe God came because I was eating something warm.

What good timing.

"Oh? Done eating already?"

Thank goodness, the Crimson Flower Company lady is still in the chapel. Ever since she came here for work, she's been in the back and I haven't been able to see her. I begged her to let me ride with her down here so I mustn't get in the way of her work or be selfish.

"Let me introduce you. This is Sira. She was asleep when we arrived," the lady says to a woman in a white hat. A very pretty woman. She has long, wavy red hair that sticks out in places. It reminds me of fire.

"Sira, this is Acolyte Hikurina, from the Church. She's helped me with my business and... hey, what's with you?"

The acolyte lady's eyes and mouth are wide open in silence. I know what it is. You can sense God's presence, can't you? His great, great presence.

"O-Oh, God..." she mumbles.

"Hm? Oh, I see. Is that it, Sira?"

"Yeah. He arrived moments ago."

The Crimson Flower Company lady isn't adept at sensing God. She's not good at magic, either. But she's always praying fervently. She must be praying for someone she'll never meet again.

"Oh... Deus Ex..." the acolyte continues to mutter.

“Sira. Could this be...”

“Don’t worry. I think it’s because I ate something tasty.”

“Ah, I see. Like that other time. Perhaps I should offer a drink.”

God’s blessing is a strange thing. Its strength differs completely depending on the person, place, and time. It’s similar to light and shadow. Just like when you look up and see the sun, God is always there when you pray to Him, but you don’t feel uneasy when He leaves. Even so, everyone wants to make sure that He’ll stay, so we pray.

So many people pray to Him now. God has gotten so popular, which means I can work even harder. Praying makes you stronger. Curling up and crying for help doesn’t get you anywhere; you have to get up and take action. You have to move forward.

“You... you are the Apostle?” asks the red-haired lady, grabbing my hand. It hurts. But Dad didn’t interfere, so she must not mean me harm. It still hurts, though.

“No,” clarifies the Crimson Flower Company lady.

“Huh?”

“What are you asking her? I told you, the Apostle is Kuroi, Hare of Flame. This girl is her servant. I guess she’s, like, second in line to God’s blessing.”

“An Apostle’s servant... God’s servant...”

“Let go of her hand.”

“Huh? Ah! I-I-I’m so sorry!”

The place where her fingers were is turning red. If I were anyone else, I would have been injured. This woman might be a warrior as well.

“Forgive me. My name is Hikurina. I serve the Church as an acolyte. In regards to you, Lady Sira, I...”

“Stop. I understand you’re elated, but Sira’s still a child. Keep grown-up formalities away from her.”

“R-Right... my apologies. My deepest apologies,” she bows over and over, her eyes fixed on the space behind me. She can sense God. And God... is looking at her? “Now I understand everything. Ange, thank you for calling me here.”

“Oh yeah? Well, one experience is worth more than a thousand words.”

“Indeed. Now I also understand Father Felipo’s crazy actions. ‘God exists, and He is great. Why must we be fettered by conventions?’ he proclaimed.”

“Crazy bastard. Has he been talking to the papers and creating nursery songs as well?”

“And delivering the Sorcerer’s Guild’s letter to the Church, as well as the north’s complaints against the nobles.”

“Oh, seriously. He really is crazy. The nobles aren’t even on our side yet.”

“No, a power struggle would just be a roundabout method. Perhaps it’s the approach we should avoid the most. Everything could have crumbled down around us before the war even began if he hadn’t spread the story far and wide.”

“You talking about the vampire loyalists?”

“Yes. The declaration of a final battle became a tailwind for the Starlight Band. Many citizens have joined them, rejecting us.”

They’re talking about difficult things, but I understand some of it. The red-haired lady is trying her best at something, but it’s hopeless. Yet she won’t give up, which is why she came here. I can tell from the look of her eyes, and the fiery color of her hair. Oh, maybe that’s why God came. Maybe he’s here to say it’ll be all right.

“Listen, you two.” At least, I hope that’s why. But even if it’s not, I’m glad He came anyway. “I think I can do a lot more now,” I declare.

Dad, come out. Not just your hand; all of you. God’s watching over us, so it’ll be fine. Ah, see? It’s been so long since we last hugged. Even longer since the last cheek rub. I’ve been hoping to see your smile for so long.

“I’m going to talk to everyone in the fort,” I continue. “I’ll tell them that I know it’s scary, but we have to try our best.” The two of them have started praying again. I smile. “I want them to know that God is with us, so it’s going to be okay. I *have* to tell them.”

46 The Strategy Meeting Within the Pentagon and About the Parallel World War

It is my pride to be human.

I was born human, so that is only natural.

-*, the Dragon God I-**

The slightly fruity scent of cacao; milky, enveloping sweetness.

The members filling the meeting room all have coffee, so it was the right decision to remain resolute and put out three cups for myself. Our time outside of the strategy room is limited, so I want to enjoy it to the fullest without anybody ruining it.

“It’s time. We hereby commence the 57th strategy meeting.” The Colonel’s voice is always so deep. It speaks to how tense he is. “First, let’s go over the situation in the parallel world. For that, see the military diagram of the central plain. The large-scale invasion force of over five hundred thousand led by Thunderstorm has, as we expected, been distributed unevenly across many points, allowing us to plot a breakthrough of their defensive line.” Seven large arrows stretch out from the vampires’ territory. From there, they branch into various smaller arrows, almost like lightning. “A deep operation, then. Its ferocity and multi-layered nature remind me of Operation Bagration from World War II. Truly, the vampires’ stamina and ability to continue fighting are astounding. Unfortunately, we do not know of a clear weakness...” All of the lines are colliding with a massive, cracked blue line. This represents the elves’ waterway network that they excavated as a nation. “As you can see, the Baptism Lines are quite effective, but ultimately it is just a defensive tactic. We have no way to predict a great offensive. As stated in the annexed table, we are suffering casualties from foot soldiers on a local level. We must act before they can mount a second attack.”

The Colonel’s eyes seem to ask if I have something to add, but I shake my head. Everything at present is as he described it, and we are having this strategy meeting because now is the best time to mount a counter-attack.

“I have a few things I wish to confirm.” A first lieutenant from the

Air Force Cyber Command raises his hand. Will this technological genius unveil yet another keen idea? “Absolute is keeping Thunderstorm busy in a stalemate. Deep Sea is on reserve until Crumbling Mountain appears. Meanwhile, our bluff card, Ten Thousand Bells... is she not going to do anything?”

“Someone more directly involved with this should answer... Captain?” the Colonel looks at me. Hm. I suppose I cannot rely on him to explain the details regarding the unique units. So much for enjoying my hot chocolate. “I expect great things from the leader of the IT department.” Yes, yes, of course, sir. Here we go.

“You are correct. We assumed there would be some sort of sudden movement after the unexpected defeat of Golden, but other than the declaration of a final battle, no moves have been made,” I state.

“No scouting from the vampires?”

“No. Everything seems to be peaceful.”

“Speculation, then... since the connection has dramatically improved, can’t we change our point of contact from Absolute to Ten Thousand Bells? That way we could gain a much more detailed look at the situation.”

“It is technically feasible, but risky. The connection could suddenly worsen, and even if we did update it, there is the possibility that the change could not be reverted.”

“That’s quite rough... Are there any other difficulties that would prevent us from fully using our greatest asset, Absolute, to his fullest extent?”

Absolute is the elves’ greatest trump card. Not only is he capable of taking on unique units, but he’s also strong enough to take on the Demon God. We must use him in the most effective way possible. Unfortunately, there is a vexing system in place. We can only speak to them in the form of an oracle, and we must focus entirely on one unit at a time, so it is difficult to get a sense of the whole picture. Things get confusing due to the difference in time flow, not to mention our differing languages and ideals.

Hm... perhaps that is why Dragon Demon RPG was sold as an action video game. It would never have passed as a flawed strategy game.

“First Lieutenant, is there something on your mind?”

“Yes, Colonel. The lack of caution towards Ten Thousand Bells doesn’t make sense. She is stationed on the southern battle lines. She could be considered a reinforcement, even if nothing happens.”

“That would be easier to accept if not for the destruction of Golden.”

Is he saying we are being neglectful? Yes, he has a point. I’m well aware of Ten Thousand Bells’ immaturity as a combat asset. Perhaps I

have lost my sense of objectivity.

"In fact, I still find the reason for Golden's defeat odd. The squabbles among the small fry in the subhuman territory... Even taking into account Ten Thousand Bells' defensive abilities, it's hard to believe it was a sudden bout of exhaustion."

This was the topic of two previous strategy meetings. I hate to be interrupted, but it's clear no one truly believes this explanation.

"U-Um, Colonel..."

"What? If you have something to say then speak up, Petty Officer."

One of the members elected by the navy hesitantly raises his hand. I recall he'd once professed to be knowledgeable about online games but so far hadn't given any great insights, nor had we any need to ask him anything, and so I had totally forgotten he existed.

"Um, about the human forces..."

"Petty Officer, let's try to keep our terms consistent. They're *subhumans*, not humans. Their Asian looks and red symbolism are truly infuriating."

"But, the Japanese..."

"The true samurai are the ones blue on your map; the red ones are to be purged. Have some common sense."

Ah, I remember now. He was stationed at Yokosuka Naval Base. No wonder he's in touch with video games and Japanese subculture.

His thoughtlessness makes my blood boil.

How can he not be bothered by the nuclear bombings on Alaska or the terrorist chemical warfare they employed on San Francisco? That's so Japanese of him, treating everything as someone else's problem and displaying a dullness similar to the tolerance of angels.

I dare you to lose your family and be turned into a paraplegic, boy. Then we'll see if your worldview stays the same.

"And? What of the subhumans' forces?" the first lieutenant is urging him on. As head of the IT department, his fixation on information is strong.

"Erm... There was talk that they were gathering people north of the fort. They were strangely excited about repelling an attack of protozoans. And, er, one of my Japanese friends was telling me..." Get to the point, man. However, no matter what it is, we all must have an equal opportunity to speak in the meeting room. That's what it means to be elected to the strategy council. "Um, there's this video posted on a streaming site. It's called a Let's Play. There's a pretty popular style of this kind of video known as live streaming..." I sip my hot chocolate. I knew this was nothing worth listening to. A grown man does not mix up video games with real life, even if real life involves a parallel world. Especially when it comes to war. "So, there's this

strange video about Dragon Demon RPG. It takes a really weird turn, and the guy becomes the god of the subhumans' forces to defend the Frontier. Like, he controls a unique unit..."

"Could it be modified game data? Those are pretty popular, right?"

"Oh, I don't think so, that was too well-done. Not to mention that the guy seems to attract viewers with his skill as a player, not by showing new items or functions. Also, the contents match up too well. For instance, Ten Thousand Bells' positioning in the Frontier. The dates are probably the same, too."

"I see. Do we have reason to believe the Japanese have independently entered into this Parallel World War?"

"W-Well, if it's a coincidence, it's practically a miracle."

"No, it must still be a coincidence. Our country has already seized Japan's super A.I., as well as their IT experts. Otherwise, we would have never been able to establish contact." The Colonel is getting irritated by this nonsensical conversation. He'll eventually cut it off and start dictating our plans for the future. So until it's time to return to the hole, I'm going to enjoy my time in human society.

Establishing contact with the elves is a very delicate act. It must be done alone. Alone, I must lead this Parallel World War again. Failure is not allowed. Either I succeed, or I don't come back at all.

47 The DDR Plan for Victory / An Ordinary Soldier Dreams of Happiness Surrounded by Fire

The human god is a god of battle. Fire is at His command.
So I fight, wielding fire.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 4-

It'd be a sign of the apocalypse if I got a delivery of steak from my parents.

Hey guys, it's PotatoStarch, your resident foodie bandwagoner. Meat is so delicious. Maybe it's because it's been carefully grilled, but I find it a perfect marriage of a crispy outside and a juicy inside. Some slow-grilled fish cake would be excellent, too.

Fire is magnificent, isn't it? Maybe I should re-examine my lifestyle of eating instant food and microwave-based meals. By the way, things seem to be going well in DDR. I'd love to raise a toast to it, but I promised not to drink alcohol anymore. Plus, wine or dry Japanese beer would go best with this juicy meat. No! Prohibition!

So, let's toast with a cup of tea! Here's to the continued rise of faith in the Devil God. Cheers! Man, things are looking up. Faith in the Devil God has started to spread far and wide, through the western towns and even to the fort. Coupled with the results of our vampire hunting, total faith points have exploded like a high school-level quadratic equation.

This must be thanks to Kuroi and Sira. Like, because I'm sending out an Apostle and her servant, the people around them are deepening their faith? I don't really know. There was no such element to the game when I played as an elf or a vampire. Faith in the Demon and Dragon God are pretty much natural to those races. They're filled with fear that their god might curse them one day.

Maybe because the humans have no Guardian God, part of the fun of the DX version is in missionary work. Look, everyone around Sira is praying. And around Kuroi, too.

Mmh? Ha! Aha ha ha! When I switch between Kuroi and Sira, they look up at me in confusion. This is fun! Click, click, click. Swapping between them at high speed! Too funny. Damn, the devs are so thorough. Oh? A new system message? Let's put my servant viewer in a separate, smaller window and... there.

Ah... yeah, I guess switching quickly between views isn't an endorsed way to play. Why do I feel like a child being scolded? It's as if someone just yelled at me for not being able to control myself.

Okay, let's move on. Time to focus on planning for humanity's great victory! The basic idea is to improve our forces while whittling away at the vampires. I could steal their land, but in the end, the Demon God will show up and kill everyone, rendering it all meaningless. It's the timing of the Demon God's appearance that I'm estimating. The trigger for this event is the number of vampire

Apostles remaining. So, what's the state of the contested lands in the center of the territory? For some reason, Thunderstorm and Absolute's markers are there.

Hm, I can't tell... At least I know that the Apostles are there, but... I'm guessing they both have about ten thousand soldiers with them. This is the final battle, after all. Worst case scenario, both the Demon and the Dragon God will show up. To put it in real-world terms, they're like nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons, nuclear strikes, nuclear war... Let's pray that never happens. Seriously.

Hm? What's this? One of them appears to be moving south. Oh, there! They moved again.

This isn't good.

Is Thunderstorm not going to engage in the usual push and pull between east and west, but instead aim for an opening from the south? That would be a real pain. We'll be smashed to splinters if we collide with the vampires' main force. An army of vampires ten thousand strong is akin to a calamity. It's apocalyptic, even.

What do I do? If they invade the south with those numbers, we'll be screwed. But I have to do something! At any rate, Kuroi's definitely not going west anymore.

Actually, Sakiel is at the Frontier. She should be able to hold off Thunderstorm for a bit. After that, all I can do is trust in the speed of my horses. If she can buy enough time, the elven main force should arrive... so much is relying on "shoulds"! These estimates are so optimistic. However, I can't just abandon the Frontier. Never.

Godspeed, Kuroi. And follow me, handsome knights. Our first stop is the Hell Expanse. We'll resupply there and then move straight to the Frontier!

-Soldier Mulaso I-

"Mulaso, are you crying?" asks the sergeant. Chowling down on my pork that still remains on the bone, I nod vigorously. I mean, it's just *so good!* And so sad.

This meat came from a pig that was left behind after its village had been massacred. Who raised this beast so well? Whoever they were, they're dead now, and I'm eating the fruits of their labor with tears streaming down my face because it's so delicious. The sergeant pauses.

"Well, eat up, man. Our job is to get down in the mud. If you don't eat, you won't last long. Plus, you'll piss off the guys already in their graves."

I nod. I nod and bite into the meat. It's so good.

There are other delicious things around the campfire as well: fresh vegetables, stews, and even wine. Tonight, we're going to eat and drink to our heart's content and restore our energy. Then, we'll offer our prayers to the many, many graves we built and bring what food we can to the refugees. They must be starving.

"Lady Kuroi's left us..." I nod at the sergeant. Indeed, Lady Kuroi went back already. After eliminating the vampires that had been terrorizing the western front, she immediately headed off to the next battlefield: the north. No rest at all. "She's amazing. She swept through those freakish monsters like they were weeds, and yet, she always looks calm and indescribably beautiful. She's definitely loved."

I don't even need to ask "by whom?" By God, of course. The human God. Lady Kuroi's existence means that God must exist.

"And those knights weren't normal, either. So fast and strong..." he continues. "They knew no fear. Of course, House Willow is known for having dauntless courage, but those stories about them pit them against small monsters and bandits. To see them rip through *real* monsters..."

That knight called himself Agias Willow, I think. We were all tied up when he saved us with his shining sword. He turned us from vampire food back into humans.

We can't fight like that; we aren't cool like them. It's not about being able to ride a horse, or about lack of swordsmanship... it's courage. We lack the courage to fight.

"Hey, wipe that sad look off your face! Not everyone's cut out to be a hero. In fact, you impressed me. I can understand your admiration, but frustration? That's something else entirely." The sergeant peers at my face, so I turn towards the campfire. The popping flames are strong and warm, dancing beautifully; they remind me of Lady Kuroi and her knights. It's marvelous to see how they don't succumb to the darkness of the night. If only I could be like that... I don't want to be a mere observer.

"Let's just focus on doing what we can to the best of our abilities. Isn't that good enough?"

His voice sounds like it's rising from the bottom of his stomach. Maybe that's why it sticks in the bottom of mine. He's right next to me, yet sounds so far away. He must be watching the fire, too.

"Lady Kuroi has things that only she can accomplish. The knights, too, have things that only they can do. That's why we should focus on what *we can* do. We'll transport all the survivors and supplies we scraped together to the city. People need us," he declares.

My gaze drops to the pile of firewood beneath the roaring flames. The wood burns, cracks, and turns to ash, which then blows away on the wind. The popping sound is coming from it, not from the flames.

“Yes, we were saved, but it’s nearly impossible to completely save someone. Perhaps, when there are lots of people you want to save, fighting is the easier route, but it’s not like God is going to rain down food from above,” he jokes, so I give a little chuckle. The human god is a god of fire and war, not of meat and wine. If that were the case, would Lady Kuroi have been a chef and not a warrior in a different life? And the knights, would they have been sous chefs and waiters, traveling to villages and delivering gourmet dishes? I bet that would make everyone happy. I could help with washing the dishes and cleaning up afterwards.

That would be nice. Really nice. Fun, even. I wish the world was like that.

“C’m on, finish up and go to sleep, we have an early morning tomorrow. Gotta turn our backs on the scary north and head south to the city at the foot of the mountain.”

I nod and lie down. My belly is full, I’m slightly drunk, and the fire’s close and warm. The sounds of people still eating and drinking are pleasant to my ears. I feel like we can keep working hard together.

God, they say You reside within fire. We’ll do what we can, in our own way. We’ll work hard. So please, grant victory to Lady Kuroi and her knights. Grant Your greatest blessings to the ones who work the hardest. And one day, I hope we can all gather around a great fire together. I bet that would be fun. If that day comes, I’m sure everyone will be able to smile and say: “I’m glad I survived.”

48 The Youngest Brother Fears a New Battle / Old Fang Hopes for a New Battle

God shows us the techniques, methods, and strategies of battle. He gives us His blessing: the power of fire.

But these do not guarantee victory. They are not victory itself. They are merely the tools for victory.

-Marius I-

I barely grunt as I send a monster's head flying with my sword.

It's late afternoon on the plains; the perfect battlefield for us Bomber Knights. A hundred goblins? Hah! Make it a thousand; it makes no difference. I swing my sword to rid it of the filth and take a deep breath, turning to the battlefield that has started to become slightly fouled with the stench of monsters.

"All platoons, strike! No fire magic!" I order. As soon as the first horse reaches the row of foot soldiers behind him, Captain Zakkow comes to me before I can give my next order.

"Just the cavalry, right, Marius?"

His expression is stern. Mine might be in a similar state.

"Yes, that's fine," I reply. The goblin horde we are fighting against came flooding towards the Hell Expanse from the mountain forests to the north. Unsure of their numbers and strength, I sortied with not only a thousand cavalry, but also a thousand foot soldiers. I'm fine with going overboard. I've decided that I will meet them with a formation that allows not even a single monster to reach the Expanse. I believe this was the correct move. Considering the sentiments of our people, it was best to go with the safest option.

"So, what do you think?"

"We are definitely being watched," I reply.

Unfortunately, my plan might have been predicted. The goblins charge without fear of death and refuse to retreat. This all points to one thing: vampires are lurking close by. Probably someplace where the forest is least dense, so they can see us clearly. This attack is, without a doubt, merely a means for them to calculate the number of soldiers in the Hell Expanse.

“Hmph... Good thing we didn’t bring the rabbits,” comments Captain Zakkow.

“Yes, indeed. And we’ll refrain from using fire magic, too.”

“Where do we strike?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you.” We also have the option to not strike. We could hide it under the guise of evacuating citizens... Furthermore, it would be easy to switch gears if needed. “Anyway, I think we should stay here a little longer and observe the enemy’s movements,” I command.

“All right. We’ll leave you to that, then.”

Captain Zakkow gives an order and the foot soldiers begin to withdraw. Good, very orderly. Of our two thousand foot soldiers, including the thousand we left in the Hell Expanse, I wonder how many of them are from these lands.

I exhale. The hand holding my reins is shivering. I have a bad feeling about all this. Our enemy is hiding completely out of view while over a thousand goblins rush across the field. We’re hunting down their pawns, but they don’t seem to be drawn in by the scent of battle. This isn’t normal.

Maybe I should send out a smaller platoon to try and gauge their forces. They could ride up to the forest and unleash a bit of fire magic; that might seize the initiative.

But... no. My Bomber Knights are our greatest asset; I can’t risk putting them in unnecessary danger. At the very least, not on my decision alone. Given the situation, I have no choice but to play along while sticking to my original plan: I can look for an opening while staying on the defensive.

We slowly draw back, slaying goblins as we go. No signs of movement from the forest. Are they waiting for the evening before making their move? Or will they strike in the dead of night? Either way, there’s no way to plan around an enemy you can’t see.

In the end, war is just subtraction; there will always be sacrifices in battle. The ideal outcome would be for no one to die... or at least, preserving our army. If worst comes to worst, I must prioritize my Bomber Knights above all else—even if it means abandoning the citizens and Captain Zakkow.

I take a deep breath and ride forward. I don’t like this wind; it’s moist, as if spreading rot. A storm is coming—a storm of violence that will torture the lives of men. Precautions are always lacking, and no matter what we do, it won’t be enough. Nevertheless, it is at times when we must hold out against all odds that we draw closer to others. Together, we pray to God.

“Deus Ex,” I mutter, praying for many things. Then, I swing my sword wide. Together, my knights quickly withdraw.

The time for battle has come, yet the hostile intentions of our enemies remain ambiguous. As I ride, I bite my lip in frustration.

-Old Fang Barebow I-

I survey the plains below from my perch on the cliff, sipping my blood wine. A drink before battle is an exquisite treat.

“Watch them run like scared deer. It makes me want to bite them in the butt.”

“Please stop, Fang Chief Barebow... it’s not funny.”

It was just a joke, so stop grabbing my sleeve. What’s with those judging eyes? Have you no sense of humor, girl?

“All right, Tamika, whatever you say goes during this operation. If you ordered me to, I’d dive into a sea of flames or water.”

“Why would I order you to do that? It makes no sense.”

“Really? The apes use fire and the elves use water. The situation could arise.”

We are at war; risks must be taken in order to slaughter our enemies. The possibility of death drives us to kill even more. That’s what’s so fun about it.

“You’ll have your chance to fight, so don’t rush to your death.”

“I *am* sitting quietly.”

“Only because I confiscated your drum and forbade you from chanting! Honestly...”

Tamika is a weird one. As expected of Golden’s close associate, I suppose. If she were simply an upstart, I could smash her head during battle and be done with it... but thanks to orders from above, that isn’t such a valid plan anymore.

“So, what now? The goblins you brought are now wiped out,” I complain.

“They did their job. Let’s wait until nightfall.”

“A night raid? Classic plan. There’re no annoying elves to interfere, either.”

“Oh, no. The battle will take place tomorrow at noon.”

“Haaah?” I exhale in exasperation. Seemingly done talking, the girl yawns.

And what was all that about making her personal grotto as smooth as possible? This is why I hate pet “mages”; they can’t even use proper magic.

“Wait. At least explain to me... Hey, what’s with that face?”

“You just said my word was absolute.”

“I’m not objecting. I’ll do what you want when you order me to, but if I don’t understand what you’re thinking, it could lead to awkward situations later.”

“What I’m thinking is that I’d like to finish things up here if possible. I’m sleepy.”

“Finish things? What do you... Don’t pull up your blanket!”

She gets tired very easily. Why does she shrivel up so much after only three or four days of no sleep? I’d hate to emulate the apes. They like strange things like fruits and vegetables, too.

It’s not loneliness, is it? As Golden’s aide, I saw her receiving that woman’s favor. Depression leading to self-abandonment is nothing but a hindrance on the battlefield.

“I told you already! Our mission isn’t to kill lots of humans or raid their towns! Don’t you remember?!” Ugh, now I do remember, I think to myself. A menacing look suddenly takes over her face. She even bares her fangs. “The elves are at the Frontier, which makes things annoying! And Ten Thousand Bells is the ultimate annoyance! Instead, if we make a big commotion out here and lure the humans to us, we can finish things easily! Do you understand now?”

Such intensity. And that mysterious magic... I see. No wonder she was Golden’s aide. This must be what the boss likes about her.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. My curiosity gets the better of me sometimes.”

I diligently walk her to her grotto. I’ve been in battles all my life, clawing my way up to Fang Chief; there’s no way I’m going out pathetically. Battle—if I’m going to die, it has to be in battle.

Finally, the royal pain in my ass is gone. I have to respect Golden. Even Apostles have their own struggles, but her death was glorious. Moreover, she went out at her peak. Now, the Apostles are being ordered around like common soldiers. Thunderstorm and Crumbling Mountain can’t disobey the boss.

She just showed up out of nowhere, too... Her damned Highness, the Demon God Strigoaică.

49 The Shadow Sympathizes with Her Enemy's Loss / The Officer Plans His Enemy's Defeat

All I have belongs to God.

Even this unease in my heart belongs to Him.

-Shadow Tamika I-

I'm giving battle orders in the middle of the day. *Me!*

My position as Golden's aide allowed me to retrieve her remains, a feat of loyalty for which I was hoping to be rewarded with a few days to mourn. That's usually the custom, not being sent to the front lines of an army that marches for days on end.

"Lady Tamika. Lady Tamika..."

Damn the Demon God. Damn Her! She should have just stayed asleep in the depths of the palace. But no, She had to come out and be so proactive all of a sudden. I can't take it! I certainly never expected Her to make an appearance at the Night Council. I had never planned to expose myself to the sun, but then I of all people got selected for this job.

Those piercing eyes... that cruel smile... it can't be. Does She know the truth about me? No, that's not possible. It just can't be, I disguised myself so well. Through sheer coincidence, I managed to perform an exemplary vampire career. I never forget my offerings or prayers, either. My record in battle is pretty good, too.

"In the middle of a vision, are you? Oh, how beautiful you are. Your face, your breasts, your skin..." mutters a voice.

It's okay. Everything's okay. I still reside within the shadows. No matter how they look at me, or how they treat me, I should be fine as long as I don't slip up and reveal my true motives or goals. This is just one of Her divine whims; nothing out of the ordinary.

Besides, what the hell was all that stuff about "the time has come" and sending a declaration of war for final battle? I hate Her from the bottom of my heart. Why does She have the right to decide the fate of this world? She's only the "Demon God." A damned being from another world... Ahg?!

"Lady Tamika, the troops are in formation."

“Huh? Oh, I see. Tell them to wait for the signal.” I bat away my second-in-command’s hand. Why does she have to touch me so erotically? It’s a real pain how she presses her breasts up against me. This is why I hate vampires...

Anyway, for now, I’ve got to focus on the battle in front of me. Like it or not, I’ve been saddled with this responsibility thanks to an imperial command; I have to succeed or I’ll be killed.

On the plains sits the human army. In their center is a row of about two thousand foot soldiers, with about a thousand cavalry sandwiching them from both sides. From the outside, it appears to be a very common formation... but my Shadow Vision uses bugs; you can’t hide your secret plans from me.

About a thousand militant rabbits are hiding behind the soldiers’ shields. In addition, despite the mass of banners and bonfires in the city behind them, there are only a few hundred injured soldiers about the place. In other words, their whole army is a little over five thousand strong, and they’re concentrating their entire force here.

On our side, counting Fang Chief Barebow’s soldiers added under my command, we have about three thousand five hundred soldiers in our main force, plus a side army of a thousand black wolves. In total, we are four thousand five hundred strong. Our victory is pretty much guaranteed. However, just in case, I have five hundred soldiers hiding in wait to finish the job should the need arise.

I know these people, I understand the strength of humans. I won’t let my guard down.

As for the signal to begin... Hmm, what should I do? Honestly, I don’t want to kill them. They came from the Frontier, so it’s likely they were in contact with that abnormality. No matter what, I don’t want to piss her off. Besides, there’s nothing to gain from wiping out the humans. It would only make the Demon God happy, which is a loss for us all. Needless to mention, I’m not looking for revenge for Golden. In fact, I’d be overjoyed if they went straight for the Demon God Herself after that battle. They’d just end up tortured to death, but at least it might have made Her drop her guard a bit.

Also, I’m not opposed to replacing Golden with the humans as my pawns. However... the war has already started. Violence is thoughtless, uncaring, ruthless, and unpredictable; it does not distinguish one life from another. And now I’m involved in it. It’s come down to this, so I don’t care what the humans’ circumstances are. I really don’t want to kill them, but that doesn’t mean I want to let them go, either. I just want the least amount of annoyances.

It’s so sad. We are all trapped in that poisonous creature’s vortex of despair born out of that “final battle” declaration. Even the vampires who are destined to win are, ultimately, just disposable

pawns. Eventually, they will be wiped out, too. The Apostles are mere supporting actors. If you aren't an Apostle, you're a bit part. No matter what your plans are, what you can actually do is limited.

I know the truth of this world more than anyone. And because of that, the burden of the duty I must execute weighs heavily upon me. Probably.

The least I can do is sympathize with these poor creatures... Yeah, I'll let them start the battle.

Go ahead.

The deeper the sun sets, the longer the shadows creep, the more they will panic. And fearing the night, they will make their move. That's our opening—the most efficient way to victory. Then, once we've won... I'll execute my mission.

-Captain Jashan son Peine II-

"Hmm... this is a battle of endurance," I mutter to myself. Marius and Zakkow round on me, a frightful look in their eyes. Considering the vampires' forces are greater than we'd imagined, I don't blame them. "Calm down, you two. The vampires have appeared, but they aren't attacking. Let us ask ourselves why. These beasts, who love battle and hunger for blood, have issued a proclamation of war with no chance for diplomacy—yet they refuse to move. Something is quite clearly afoot."

I dramatically cross my legs, causing my stool to creak. It's a sickening sound, like a scream. I slap my belly, even though I am not full, and my armor clangs happily. Our soldiers are watching and listening; their leaders cannot afford to become nervous.

"Is it a trap?" asks Marius.

"Probably. Which is very unlike the vampires to do."

"A trap... Maybe they're keeping us here while they take a separate force the long way around to attack the Expanse."

"That isn't a plan a warrior would come up with. Surely they would rather slam those extra men into us from the side or head-on."

"Maybe they changed strategies after observing us."

"That might be the case if our opponents were the honest sort..."

If we base our guesses on human behavior, I would have no issue with Marius's answer. Certainly, that would be the superior strategy. But would these beasts do such a thing? Or have they crafted some sort of plan?

"Then perhaps it is a silent threat. Maybe they wish for us to withdraw without fighting."

"We cannot expect such politeness from these things. Don't you remember Golden? She brought her forces all the way from the far

north... oh! I see! Maybe..."

Maybe they came here with a specific goal in mind. Therefore, if this situation satisfies that goal, then there would be nothing strange about it at all. Observe the human army? No, what they've done so far would have been enough. If our destruction were their objective, they would have attacked by now. What is it? How are they planning to make use of this situation?

"Hmmm... At present, they don't seem to be itching to fight. Are they buying time? Or do they simply not care how long this takes? Which is it?"

"Is there a difference?"

"If it's the former, we can evacuate the citizens. We can leave our army here to show them we don't intend to let anyone through. Would that be a win-win situation?"

"Hold on. There are many citizens, and the Frontier is far away. If they attack..."

"Then we can simply fight back with the strength of demons. If we do, they will surely withdraw. If their goal is to buy time, then they'll want to avoid such a short-term decisive battle."

"That's a crazy plan."

"This is war. Oh, but if it comes to that, I want you to fight from afar, Marius. Our priority is to preserve the Bomber Knights. You understand this as well, right, Zakkow?"

"Yes... but are you going to fight head-on, too? What about taking command of a wing of cavalry?"

"I told you, no horses for me, please. The wounds on my inner thighs are deep. Those black wolves are as vicious and barbaric as their masters. At least I was able to protect my dick."

I spread my legs and shake for them. See? They're all laughing now. Dirty jokes are the best at times like this. They're down-to-earth, and make one remember one's real self.

"Then allow me to check if your plan will work," says Marius.

"Oh, are you going to do a bit of scouting? Perhaps you should move after we observe the situation for a bit more."

"Of course, a light challenge should reveal many things to us."

"Be sure not to clash head-on, now."

Marius chuckles. "It'll be just a tickle."

Good, good. That black-hearted smile means I have nothing to worry about. A young, rosy-cheeked warrior has no business acting as the tragic hero.

Now that I've taken care of these two's morale, it's time to think. How do we win? Engaging in an espionage war is way too difficult for one as kind, cheerful, and pure of heart as I... but it is much easier than a brute force slugfest.

I can feel it in the air; the blood-sucking beasts at the very front are desperate for battle. They are being forced to do something unusual, but they cannot disobey. It must be quite... frustrating. Even the small fry of Golden's army were allowed complete autonomy. There is simply no way these beasts can put up with such orders from someone who is not an Apostle. At least, not for very long anyway.

Whatever they are planning, whatever sort of trap this is, if a drawn-out battle is what they require, then eventually a weakness will appear. If we leave them alone, they will slowly destroy themselves. This is a battle of attrition, and no one is better at sucking it up than us. We shall wait patiently for the loose ends to fray... Ah, what sport this is!

50 The Captain Fights Hard, then Awaits the Morning of the Decisive Battle

Watch the flames; stare deeply into the burning, dancing tongues. I am here. We are here. God, too, is here.

-Captain Zakkow II-

The clanging of bells breaks the silence of the night. Camps are burning. Howls and screams fill the air. We knew they would come, but the battle is fiercer than anyone could have imagined. So these are vampires, huh?

“Captain! Captain Zakkow! There are more coming from the west!”

“Got it! More oil to that side! Kick over the watch-fires!” I shout, turning towards the source of bloodlust and excitement, spear in hand.

“Fire is our ally! We are fire! Men, douse them in oil!”

Vaulting over the blazing wall of fire, I miss my landing and stumble spear-first into a vampire illuminated by the flames. I stab, stab, and stab it some more. All I can do is pierce him. Meanwhile, some young soldiers run up behind me and cleave its head off with an ax, fang necklace and all.

“Yes! We did it, Captain Zakkow!”

“Good! That’s the way! But it’s too early to celebrate!”

“Yes, sir!”

“And just call me Captain! You’re a corporal, aren’t you? A good one at that!”

“Is that so, sir!”

They’re still volunteer soldiers at heart, even if they’ve been promoted, but they’re all heroic men, every last one of them.

Suddenly, a bestial howl comes from the side. About thirty vampires are charging at us. Judging from their movements, they must be thunder mages. Shit, magic!

“Fall back! Into the fire!”

I throw myself towards the closest bonfire and its roaring, surging flames. I close my eyes. Immediately, I hear the sound of something bursting. Heat singes my skin; thunder pierces my ears; screams rend

my heart. How many died? Who died? Oh, the corporal... And right after his heroic deed, too. Some soldiers are still breathing. Their bodies are numb, they struggle to wield their spears. I will not abandon them. I will not let this continue.

Unexpectedly, something flies through the air, and a flash catches the corner of my eye. Oh! It's them! The rabbits! Wielding their sword-like horns as weapons, our comrades leap towards the vampires. They aim for the feet, the fingers, and even the neck if the chance presents itself. The vampires are taken aback for a bit.

"Now! Press forward!" I command while charging in. The night air slices at my stinging cheeks. Before me is a confused vampire brushing off the corpse of a militant rabbit—I drive my spear into his face. With a swift movement, I pull back and stab again. This time, the spearhead gets stuck in his crotch. It won't come out.

"Rahhhhhh!"

I draw my hatchet and leap towards another vampire. His arm is wrapped tightly around someone's spear—I sever it. His other arm whips around, but I jump away as he scrapes my helm. I won't be caught.

Hmph, it's hot. Well, I took a bath of fire earlier.

"Dieee!" I scream with all of my might.

I drive my hatchet into the enemy's throat. Black, smelly blood spurts everywhere. No, there's also animal fat mixed in there as well. Did someone throw a vial of oil at him? The flames burn even hotter.

"Grahhhh!" I roar.

With rabbits at my back and surrounded by spears sticking out of the ground, I engage the vampires in combat. This is a flame-soaked, hand-to-hand combat. It's so hot. Hot. The heat takes over, moves my body. I swing my hatchet like there's no tomorrow.

Fools. Stupid vampires.

The commander often called them blood-sucking beasts that would even leap into fire. Well, everything is on fire here; there is no night or darkness. No water, wind, or clouds can exist in this land. The earth is covered in flames... This is now a battlefield for those of us who live and breathe fire.

Behold, vampires! This is the power of our fire resistance magic! As fire-fighting soldiers, we put our all into learning this spell. It all started from God's blessing, which kept us from receiving simple burns. At present, we can live in an exhilarating, refreshing flame bath. We fight on a battlefield of flames.

"Stab them! Overwhelm them! Burn the vampires to death!"

Once we've managed to withstand their initial attack, the rest is easy. The standoff lasted three days, so our fire traps are fully prepared.

From the other side of the flames, I can hear the clapping of horse hooves. I am in awe at Marius's excellent leadership. He doesn't try to intercept the vampires' invasion, but instead cuts it off completely. Then he destroys their coordination, holding back just enough to keep them from scattering everywhere... it's beautiful.

Oh, the sound of the bells has changed. No more vampires are coming, eh? Just as the commander predicted, this night raid was just a slight bit of foreplay.

"All right, men! Keep up the oil! Don't let the flames die!" I bark my orders and strike at any vampires I see.

Steadily, I make my way through the camp, killing vampires and watching my comrades being killed, I fight on. I stab, stab, and stab some more. My spear and I are one.

Before the sun even begins to rise, the noise of battle fades. The flames, too, lose their intensity.

A new bell sound... the enemy is withdrawing. For the moment, we've won.

"All platoons, roll-call! Odd-numbered platoons are on perimeter patrol! Even-numbered platoons are to gather up the injured and draw a circle! Don't forget your fire preparations!"

My spear is done for, the shaft is completely broken. I'll have to borrow yours, my fallen brother. I won't forget your spirit. I'll take this hatchet, too. I won't forget your bravery, either.

Oh, God. God of fire, war, and us humans. Please, grant these warriors' souls rest... Deus Ex.

"Hey, Zakkow! Burning nicely, I see," the commander jokes. For someone whose crotch is injured, he's sure got a spring in his step. He has no intention of running away, does he?

"Your guard is lacking, sir. At least bring fifty soldiers with you."

"If things get hairy, I'll jump into the midst of the soldiers. More importantly, tell me about the rabbits. How reliable are they?"

"Quite reliable, sir. They don't have the strength to finish off an enemy, but they are good for sowing chaos."

"I see. Perhaps we can use them to deal with the vampires' black wolves." Now that he mentions it, I begin to wonder. Where were the black wolves? I didn't see a single one. It would have been a slightly more difficult battle with them in the mix. "A rough count would put tonight's raid at about four to five hundred vampires. An okay number, but most likely the selfish actions of the more reckless ones. The lack of familiars speaks to this."

The commander picks up a rabbit that scampers over to his feet. The damned man looks so happy as he strokes its back.

"You little ones aren't divine vassals, oh no. You serve God directly and pray to Him in your own way... you have a unique way of

doing things,” he speaks while addressing the rabbit.

“Wolves value the pack, and will not disobey their leader. The black wolves are no different.”

“Exactly. Thanks to Marius, we discerned a bit of the enemy’s plan, but now I’m sure.” In nights previous, Marius repeatedly harassed the enemy camp... but the vampires never attacked his horse’s exposed sides as he rounded the battlefield. “Whoever their leader is, they’re akin to an Apostle and they wish to fight here for as long as possible.”

“Then they don’t understand their own army. Their leadership is naive.”

“I’ve seen this sort of thing many times in the Church and the Capital. When there is an imbalance between achievements and status, one tends to be isolated. Disproportionate power compared to authority creates chaos. When the two are combined, it creates a self-righteous nuisance. They seek the reason for their failures outside of themselves. It only ends in frustration.”

“So if we leave them alone, they’ll self-destruct?”

“If only... but the Demon God is not so naive. Their sudden declaration of a final battle is a testament to that. And with such a deity’s authority behind them, this mysterious new leader is planning something...” Hmph. The commander’s eyes narrow as he gazes toward the enemy forces, or possibly even further. He’s observing something beyond the bounds of our vision... Perhaps even beyond the bounds of time. What that might be, I have no idea. What I do know is that this man is a schemer—the sort of warmonger that stinks of blood more than anyone.

“The place of Golden’s death is so close, yet we are here,” he continues. “If they feared Ten Thousand Bells, then surely we would be fighting much further out, yet here we are. An extended battle in this land... for what purpose? Their own designs? God’s will?”

No matter what happens, I can’t let this man die. Warriors like me and Marius can be trained, but he is irreplaceable. He can’t fool me, either—I see that he wishes to die.

“Would it be possible to evacuate the citizens to the Frontier now?” I ask.

He can take command of that operation. If it’s just fighting, and not winning that is the focus here, we can make do.

“No, we should do the opposite: tomorrow, we shall mount an offensive.” What is he saying? No, what is he seeing? “I have a bad feeling about this—a very bad feeling. As long as we don’t know our enemy’s goal, I think it is a bad idea to prolong this any more. Perhaps focusing on this extended battle is the true trap.”

A trap. I doubt it’s out of paranoia that he repeatedly insists on

that. And there are only two things that I can think of that would unsettle this man: threats to Lady Kuroi, and the annihilation of our species. Depending on the situation, both might be possible.

Silently, I listen to the damage report. Tonight's dead: fifty-eight. Injured soldiers requiring transport to the city: a hundred and ten. All together, almost two hundred casualties. Despite our fire traps, we lost ten percent of our forces. Dozens of rabbits probably died as well. This is the reality of engaging in battle with the vampires.

"Can we win?" I ask. It's a pointless question. It's not like we can run away.

"If we are to win, then tomorrow morning would be our only opportunity. Press the attack while they're still reeling from their failed raid."

"A full-scale assault, then? How manly."

"If we do not succeed, then there is no future for us. Of that, I am sure."

Damn. His callous remarks make me want to sigh in defeat. One of his greatest shortcomings is that he tends to give up on life easily at decisive moments. This is the danger of those who have survived a brush with death.

I'll show him. I'll fight and fight, all to make sure he and Marius survive. If I am to entrust my spirit to the men that will be instrumental in future battles, well... I could ask for no better fortune.

I order my men to perform maintenance to their weapons and get some rest, then wait for the morning glow. I refuse to sleep as I await the crimson rays that shall decorate my grave.

51 The Youngest Brother Makes the First Strike with His Swift Horse / DDR Video Data

Ride. Ride towards the oncoming enemy.
It's cold. Why? I do not fear anything, and yet...

-Marius II-

“Allow me to impress upon you one thing Marius, youngest son of House Willow: do not die.”

That's what Commander Jashan son Peine said to me earlier this morning, before I set out. The first attack against the vampires is up to my discretion. With only one strike, I need to be able to seize their initiative without failure.

“Men, prepare your magics... and proceed forward,” I command.

Leading the left wing, I head out. The right wing follows in sync. Leaving a gap in the center, where the foot soldiers would be, two thousand cavalry sortie. The ground shakes and dust clouds rise from their horses' hooves.

Heh heh, the vampires are watching. Good. The vampires and elves would do well to observe us carefully. That way, they can learn what happens when a species is locked into a corner of the world and left to die. Then they can rethink their ways. We are not to be looked down upon. We are not to be treated carelessly. Once they realize that, they'll surely understand the necessity of diplomacy. War is subtraction, but it does not need to continue until one side reaches zero. A “final battle” is not something any living being should consider. We shall rip through their reckless declaration with our fierce fighting.

“Fire bombs at the ready.”

The goblin corpses scattered across the field are a slight nuisance to those of us on horseback. The foot soldiers will be joining the fight soon, too. This is certain to become a brawl—which is why our first strike is going to be with maximum firepower.

“Here we go!” I ride forward, leaving the cavalry to its own devices.

The enemy doesn't need to think of us as one strong unit; I want

them to see us as a horde of powerful individuals. See? The vampires charge at us straight-on. Recklessness invites recklessness. One after the other, they hurry to join the fray, glaring fiercely with no signs of fear.

“Line up! Prepare to release!”

My men slide quickly and effortlessly into formation, which startles the vampires.

“Fire!” I throw a fire bomb as hard as I can.

Our Infernos go off before the vampires can even start conjuring their thunder magics. We’re a little too far away to do any real damage, but that’s fine. My goal was to fill the battlefield with heat, explosive noises, and smoke.

Bear witness to our will—our fighting spirit and guts!

“Chip away at the right side!”

My men gather up, sharpening our front line. Our target is the tear in their forces to the far right. We gallop hard and break through, cutting off about two hundred vampires and running them through. No need to fuss about decapitating them; as we advance, we throw Inferno bombs behind us. Those who should die, die. My goal is not maximum subtraction.

Normally, I would retreat at this point, but this time we continue. We circle around and charge in again, deep into the enemy forces towards their backline.

There, found them—a single group that remained resolute despite repeated taunts and fire magic assaults. Their unvampire-like defensive formation tells me exactly who’s hiding within.

The enemy commander of this battle. The one whose grand strategy disturbed Commander Jashan son Peine is right there.

I will crush them.

Perhaps it is meaningless. Perhaps their plan can no longer be stopped. Even so, I will kill them. I do not know the details, and I cannot see the big picture, but they have committed the sin of making us feel even slightly threatened. I cannot forgive this insult. They shall pay with their life.

I kick my spurs into my horse’s sides. Faster!

Our right wing is closing in; a pincer strike two thousand strong. We will destroy their thousand soldiers. Just you wait and see.

Hm? That older-looking female vampire in the heavy armor... Why is she sticking her warhammer into the ground? There’s also a bunch of other vampires who all have their hands on the ground. I sense mana building up.

“No! Scatter!” But before I can get it out, the ground swells.

It’s earth magic. A dozen stone walls burst forth, blocking our path. They’re so tall our horses can’t even leap over them. The air is

filled with the sounds of crashings and horses falling against the vampires' absolute defense.

Then they attack; roaring savagely, the vampires charge. We've been stripped of our speed and escape route... there's no running away.

"Don't stop! Spiral formation!"

The spiral formation: an attack carried out by ten separate cavalry platoons. A brawl on horseback. This is our only option now.

I swing my spear head-on at a leaping vampire. It doesn't hit, but it knocks him off balance. I follow up with a swing of my sword and take off in another direction. Another vampire presents himself before me. I stab him with my spear, shattering the shaft in the process. I keep riding. Once again, another vampire appears. I'm clearly being targeted. I whip out my sword, clashing its white steel against the black iron of the enemy's warhammer. Sparks fly as shockwaves ripple up my arm. In a straight-up slugfest, a vampire's brute strength shines.

"So you're the leader!" A newer, more fearsome foe presents herself against me—the earth mage from earlier. She easily hefts her warhammer above her head. It must be a trap.

"And if I am?" I taunt her.

I issue a single hand signal and leap; horse and rider are as one. Below me, I can see the ground caving in. The ten riders behind me scatter to avoid the chasm.

"Dieeee!" curses the vampire.

"I'd prefer not to."

The warhammer comes racing to meet me as I land. It whistles through the air and slams into my sword. Blade on hammer, I push back, altering its course. I have to protect my horse. Somehow I manage it, but my shoulder and elbow are shot. What a fierce blow.

"You running away?!"

"Try and catch me if you can!"

I order ten of my men to follow me. We race through the maze of earthen walls, dodging or cutting down vampires depending on the situation as we make our way out of the battlefield. I swing my sword above my head, rallying the Bomber Knights as we retreat. Behind me, I can hear the sounds of sporadic explosions.

I screwed up, and many men paid for my mistake with their lives. I shouldn't have gone straight for their leader. However, it wasn't a total failure—I did manage to spot a lone female vampire with a scared expression and no weapon. That spell that she used to sink into the ground must have been a new one. It sure kicked up a lot of dirt, though.

In any case, that was certainly their leader. I'll remember her face for the next time. There *will* be a next time. We have the initiative,

after all. And there's no way the vampires will be able to stay calm after being run over like that. Nor will their leader be able to stop pissing herself long enough to prevent them from attacking. The floodgates of violence have been busted wide open.

Now, for the fight that will decide it all.

A pack of black wolves is sweeping across the plains, like a dark gust of wind mowing through the grass. The vampires follow close behind, kicking up a dust cloud so large that they look like a landslide. Both enemy forces are akin to natural disasters—impossible to avoid or resist. They are death incarnate.

However, that is precisely why we were given fire and blades: to drive back all such threats. With valiant battle cries and reassuring footsteps, we face them head-on, creating a tight formation. Meanwhile, our fire-resistant foot soldiers march forward, their shields like scales, bristling with spears. Vials of oil sway under fluttering banners. The dawn burns red. Rabbits leap forwards from under our feet, front teeth bared and ears laid back. Their sword-like horns are positioned evenly with the ground.

Vampires are nothing to us—our spirit is beautiful. In the whole world, there are no species abandoned by God. Let them come; we shall crush them. And then, for the first time, we shall be the victors.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 5-

They say that ignorance is bliss... but what do you do once you're no longer ignorant?

Hey all, it's PotatoStarch. Sorry, I'm on the verge of crying from worry and fear. I just realized that my parents don't know my address. The process of moving out was so complicated with the housing application and the rent allowance that I told them I'd contact them once things had calmed down. However, I forgot that I forgot all that! My company would never tell them my address, either. After all, my boss told me I am essentially "working overseas." After contacting him, he said their information security control is perfect and laughed it off. Technically, I'm keeping their secret for a paid vacation.

The thing is, I had some steak today... it was really good. But I'm lower middle class, so I felt guilty that I might have eaten someone else's meat. Therefore, I double-checked the package, and it was addressed to me! Who? Who gave me meat as a present? I mean, it was an online order, so anyone who knows my address could have done it. But then, why did they put my mother's family name under the sender? They even added a message: "Be sure to eat some meat every now and again!" Now I realize that I've never once been told that before. Well, my parents always were a bit inattentive... which makes using my mother's name even more confusing. It must have been a mix-up.

Actually, hold on. Does this mean... I'm under observation? I-Is that my job now? Game addiction and infrastructure stuff? Ha ha ha... I felt stupid just by saying that. As if that could be true.

Oh, by the way, I just realized that the access dates on the video data I'm recording are off. Who's been sneaking a peek in my stuff? What are they after? What do they want from me? Well, they probably want me to play more DDR, I'm guessing. That makes sense. It's still weird, but at least it makes me a bit relieved... Ugh.

Perhaps the person behind this is the one who sent me that email in Romanian? If they were spying on my video data, then yeah, they'd totally send me that stupid message about hope and whatever. Yup, could be. This mystery about the steak, however, is incredibly strange.

I-I'm scared. Simply scared. I feel like a big hole has opened up beneath me.

Ugh... At least Kuroi has already reached the Hell Expanse... whoa! A battle event already? A pack of black wolves is clashing against militant rabbits! What a great fight! Wow! A revolution of the food chain! Go, Kuroi! It's time for battle!

52 The Shadow Orders a Deadly Surprise Attack / The Commander Orders a Deadly Charge

I wish to God. I pray to God. I offer myself to God.
And after receiving His blessing, we fight—for our own sake.

-Shadow Tamika II-

What crime did I commit to be forced into doing this?

“Lady Tamika, it’s dangerous here.”

Is this the Demon God’s doing? Maybe some sort of curse... or have I incurred Her wrath? Is that why my soldiers are ignoring my orders and the enemy is attacking recklessly?

“Lady Tamika, please step back a bit...”

“Shut up! I was at the very back, and I was attacked! That’s why I’m sticking to the center!”

I’ve selected a hundred earth mages to be my personal guards. Their orders are to immediately cast Stone Shield and Earth Wall if anything happens. It’s also very important that no thunder mages are around me. I just need shadows. As long as I have them, I can cast Sink. The light from the humans’ fire magic is annoying, but if worst comes to worst, I can hide in the shadow of some soot-covered armor. Moreover, there’s always the option to hide in the shadow of a human corpse. I’d even take a shield; just give me a shadow I can sink into.

I’m not going to die. Not as the Demon God’s pawn. Hell no!

“The cavalry! Focus on the cavalry! They’re aiming for me!”

“Lady Tamika, the cavalry have already run away...”

“It’s a temporary retreat. They’ll be back! I can see them preparing behind their foot soldiers!”

That man leading the cavalry has such cold, piercing eyes. Stop! Don’t look at me. I’m no ally of the humans, but that doesn’t make me their enemy either. I’m risking my life for the sake of this world, too. You don’t understand!

“Ugh... You’re strong, aren’t you?” I mutter.

I can’t believe they’re fighting evenly against vampires. Their mass of shields and spears doesn’t even flinch against the monstrous strength of my soldiers. It’s thanks to the flaming oil they spread

everywhere. What the hell are they? How can they fight while on fire?! Not only are vampires weak to fire, but it also obstructs my magic. Such a pain.

The real key to all of this, however, is their militant rabbit familiars. Jumping into the chaos caused by the black wolves is a strong strategy for us. Unfortunately, those rabbits cut off that option. Like acrobats, they hop, crouch, and leap horns-first. They've definitely been blessed by a deity. Militant rabbits are normally prey for black wolves, so the fact that they're different from normal is putting the wolves at a disadvantage. Our familiars are at the mercy of their own ignorance.

For the vampires, a brawl between familiars hinders their attack, but for the humans, it actually helps them. If you add to that mix wild, idiotic use of flames... this happens.

It makes no sense. We were supposed to win this easily. Is this the power of the human god... the Devil God? I hate it. The Demon God, Dragon God, and Devil God should all just die. They're invaders with no shame or common sense, sneaking their foreign tentacles into our lands. They should all be executed. This world's fate should be decided by its inhabitants, so why is such selfishness allowed? It's the definition of outrageous.

Justice. I have justice on my side—a righteous indignation to correct the warping of this world and a duty to restore it to its original state. That's why I made a contract with the spirit of darkness, granting me true magic.

Earth, thunder, water, wind, and fire—I shall liberate all the spirits that have been subjugated by these false gods. One day, I shall return things to their natural order. I *cannot* die here.

“Huff... Ngh... Guh!”

I'm scared. Scared. Even now, I can sense that cavalryman aiming for me. Hurry up and kill him. Where's Fang Chief Barebow? Where is she right now? To the left, where we're making the most progress? But she's too slow; she needs to press harder. She'll never reach that man at this rate.

I'll have to use my trump card.

We're in such a stalemate that even Fang Chief Barebow won't be able to complain if I do. She's got a good nose, too, so she'll surely follow up on my strategy. Then we'll destroy them. We'll win.

“I order you all to withdraw! Back to where there are no goblin corpses!”

I can't breathe. With my trembling hands, I grip my chest. I shut my jaw tightly and try to steady myself.

“Subterraneans, arise! Prepare for a surprise attack!” I command.

The five hundred soldiers under the earth will guarantee us

victory. I prepared this trap the night after the goblins were wiped out. They won't be affected by the fire, oil, and corpses on the surface far above them. It'll be okay. The enemy will never see this coming.

You usurpers were too busy looking up to notice the danger beneath your feet. Now taste defeat! And if you have to die, then go ahead and *die* already.

-Commander Jashan son Peine III-

"Push! Push them back!" Zakkow's voice reverberates reassuringly in my belly. It makes me want to shout: "Yes, sir!" If we all charged forward right now, I'm sure we would win.

"Commander! A message from Marius! Requesting permission to strike at the enemy's back!"

Damn it, Marius, you're too hot-blooded for a man of refinement.

"Rejected!" I won't allow it. If the beasts see our cavalry sweeping around the side now, they'll scatter. If that happens, then our foot soldiers won't be able to catch them. If they head for the Hell Expanse as a consequence, I wouldn't be able to bear it. "The cavalry is to hold its position and watch for any enemy movements!" Don't panic. We've managed to drag them into our flames. There's no need to throw away our advantage now. Flames, when gathered together, become an inferno. "Temper your spirits and wait for my orders! Tell them that!"

We're up against blood-sucking beasts with monstrous strength. We can't possibly push through them now. The Bomber Knights will only enter the fray to deal the death blow. First and foremost, we must create the perfect opportunity for their Inferno spells.

Hm? I've stepped on something. It's the corpse of a black wolf, it would seem. The beasts don't have the same blessing we possess, so they are finding it hard to even breathe in this battlefield aflame. Lesser beings like the black wolves simply end up like this. My, these fireproof soldiers have proved to be quite the invention. Odysson has such nasty ideas. I should have expected as much of a master of fire. In the end, the art of war comes down to who is better at harassing the other. How dangerous.

Of our enemies, the elder one seems to be the most problematic. Everything she does drips in barbarity. That hammer of hers sends guts and flesh flying all over. She sure knows how to destroy our morale... oh! Well, this isn't good. She's incredibly strong. At this rate, she might even break through our three layers of soldiers.

"Men, draw your swords! We'll be entering the fray as well!" I command my soldiers.

If she breaks through, our whole army will feel the repercussions. Damn old bitch, she knows what she's doing. A clever warrior and a

nasty personality to boot—the exact opposite of a pure-hearted soul like me... mmh? What's this? She's retreating? Now? After how far she pressed our side? Is she stupid? Well, let's not let this advantage slip away.

“Foot soldiers, forward! Surround and burn them! Cavalry... huh?”

Wait, they're *all* retreating? That makes no sense. What's wrong with them? If they were afraid of fire they would be running for their lives, and I highly doubt they're scared of us humans. Hm... what did Marius say? Something about the enemy's leader pissing herself. Is that it, then? Is that where this clumsy attempt at strategy is coming from?

“...Center foot soldiers, charge! Into the thick of it!”

It's a trap. Nine times out of ten, it's a trap. However, it's an awfully executed one. At the very least, there doesn't seem to be much coordination between their leader and that vampire hag. That's our opening. That's where we'll strike.

“Press, press! Look at how they stumble over themselves!”

Attack! Momentum is important here. If we take advantage of their lack of coordination, we can win. No—if we don't, we'll never stand a chance. Our enemy is untiring; their explosive strength and stamina are vastly superior to ours. We have to hurry and make this chance at an offense ours...

Whoa! What have I stepped on this time? A goblin corpse? Such a damn nuisance. Even a starving black wolf won't eat dead monster flesh, I suppose.

No... that's not true. Vampires know nothing of supply trains, but there's no way they'd leave edible meat alone. This is suspicious... there might be poison traps or flesh-eating bugs hiding here. Anything infectious would be fatal. The sickness that is the source of the stench is nothing but bad news.

What should I do? The side wings of foot soldiers are still some distance away from the bodies. Do we push through? Or do we stop, and keep the contamination to the center soldiers?

“C-Commander! There! There!”

“Use your words, man! How am I supposed to understand... What the hell is that?!”

From the west, a single rider rushes toward us at blazing speed. Long, raven hair flicks in the wind... huh? It's Lady Kuroi! What is she doing here? Why is she charging straight forward? Where are Commander Willow and his men?

Oh! She summons a spear and grips it upside down. It's that stance from the other night. Still atop her horse, without so much as a wobble, she hurls her spear. It flies through the air like an arrow and strikes the mountain of goblin corpses. Immediately, it bursts into

flames—the same magical flames that were Golden’s undoing.

And from the flames... screams. Arms shoot out, and then vanish into ash.

Ah-hah. So that’s what it was.

“Retreat! Be careful of the goblin corpses!” I shout, reacting to the situation.

A body moves, and something bursts from underneath. My God, it’s a vampire. How many days had it been lying under there? I don’t know how many more there are like it, but for them to wait in ambush covered in monster blood and dirt... That’s...

...so incredibly stupid.

Oh, pardon. I mean, adorable. Silly beasts.

“There are enemies beneath the corpses! Burn them all! Douse them with oil and light them on fire!”

Whoever came up with this plan is still way too naive. What is this, a child’s prank? Don’t risk your soldiers’ lives on a plan that is so easily exposed!

“Side foot soldiers, tighten up formations! Central foot soldiers, split into two groups and join either wing! And finally...” I order as I run. This is what Marius has been dying to hear all along. “Cavalry, chaaarge! A path’s been opened for you! Now get to them before Lady Kuroi does! Ha ha haaa!”

53 The DDR Radar / The Soldier Witnesses Humanity's Bonds of Flame

Fire burns deep in my heart. Fire connects us all.
Fire. Fire is the bond that connects us to God.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 6-

I'm scared. Ahhh, I'm so scared! Too scared to go to the bathroom, so I'm focusing on the battle. I'm the kind of guy that gets nutrients from the battlefield! Probably! Dual-wielding atop my horse, I *slash* and *slice*! Every strike of my Flame Blade grants certain death! Charge, my steed... uh... Chocolate Pudding! I'm really dying for something sweet right now! I'll be sure to buy some chocolate bamboo shoot biscuits from the convenience store later! The more bamboo shoots, the better! None of those mushroom ones, please.

So, what is going on with this battle? I just sorta charged in without thinking. The vampires and humans are locked in hand-to-hand combat, pushing and pulling each other down. Not to mention the humans are literally on fire, devil-red and skin the color of mocha. Doesn't the heat wear them out? Come on! Livin' la vida loca.

Furthermore, there are vampires hiding under the dead bodies of monsters, like some sort of zombies or weird ninjas. See? Over there, too! I'll just toss my spear and... strike! Now you're all livin' la vida loca. So easy.

I mean, you can't hide from my mini map's radar. It's pointless to wait in ambush there. Actually, I feel a little bad now. Like I just ruined a surprise birthday party.

"Damn, the ape Apostle! I'll send her crying home with some flying lava!"

Hey, a named enemy. Something-something Barebow. She wields a warhammer, huh? That pretty much guarantees she's an earth mage. What are her stats?

"Guh! That glint in her eyes creeps me out! And I'm never creeped out! Forget it! Run! We did our jobs, damn it!"

The earth rises and great walls of stone rise up, cutting off all paths forward. Ah, I see. So it's standard practice for them to throw out Earthen Wall and Stone Shield like it's going out of fashion against mounted fighters. Unfortunately for them, magic is still magic. Hup! As you can see, my Flame Blade cuts through it all. In a clash of magics, it's always the stronger spell that comes out on top... hm? Wow, they're fast runners. Who are you, Usain Bolt?

I could chase them down, but... this battle is pretty much won. That cavalry charge down the center was the clincher, I think. It was so cool and cinematic how they split the vampire forces in half. And then those hand-grenade-looking things they tossed over and over? That must have dealt a lot of damage.

I was thinking the vampires weren't so impressive because it is the

middle of the day, but even so, the humans have gotten really strong. And fire is extremely effective against vampires. I doubt we would have won against the elves under the same conditions. They'd just blow away our fire with their wind and water, and any grenades would be shot down with arrows.

Hm... Does that mean this DX version has a lot of anti-vampire mechanics in place? I felt this during the battle against Golden, but when the humans and elves team up they can make quick work of the vampires. Water for defense, fire for offense. And this might just be me being pedantic, but why are vampires the only ones with a weakness? No other race is weak to an element, but they can't cross flowing water and are weak to fire... Well, if you think about it as the game being loyal to traditional vampire lore, then I guess it works out? Honestly, though, isn't that loyalty in the wrong sense?

All in all, I have a nagging feeling I can't get rid of... Maybe they get special treatment because they're the strongest race? In order to balance them, perhaps the devs gave them weaknesses. Come on, devs...

Anyway.

After a little bit of Dynasty Warriors roleplaying, here we are: the vampires have lost and are running away. It's an overwhelming human victory. Wow, they're really cheering loudly. The rabbits are hopping about, too. So fancy. The cavalry aren't giving chase, either. That's the right choice, I think. Whether it's against vampires or elves, chasing them into the forest is like trying to fight a shark underwater.

Besides, the main vampire force is closing in just on the other side of the forest. Where are they now, exactly? Let's check for Thunderstorm on the overworld map. Hmmm... yep, I can sense them taking the long way around through the south. On the contrary, Absolute hasn't moved. Mmmh...

Does this mean the elven army hasn't caught on to Thunderstorm's movements? It's a possibility. For example, they could have left ten thousand or so vampires behind as a distraction. Apostles, for all their great strategic importance, can be very light-footed. Such a diversion would certainly be possible.

Thinking about it that way, this system that allows me to see Apostle locations is kind of like a cheat. I-Is that okay? Is this information even accurate? U-Um...? Thunderstorm's marker disappeared. Was it because I complained? Is this some kind of new service that instantly responds to player feedback, similar to what happened with Sira's viewing window? I've got a lot to deal with in real life already, so can you not? Damn, I'm getting scared again. Please stop, PotatoStarch Observing Company. Stalking is a criminal offense. Unngh... huh? The marker's back. Stop toying with my

emotions!

Wait, now it's Crumbling Mountain? Not Thunderstorm? And why is the marker in that location? That's the southern corner of the western front. The only place I can think of over there is the mountain range that splits the human territory into north and south: the Sacred Shield Mountains, more commonly called the Iron Wall. Nestled in its center is the fort, which protects the human safe zone. It's the whole reason no one has ever tried to attack that location before; it's a complete dead end to the west.

So why is he there? At the foot of the mountain is the biggest human city. Why is Crumbling Mountain's marker slowly moving its way south? Whoa, whoa... this is bad. What's going to happen to the city? What is this Apostle doing? Hey... Hey, hey, hey! Why isn't he stopping?! It can't be... It can't be!

-Soldier Mulaso II-

"Mulaso! Hey, you alive?"

I reach out towards the sound of the sergeant's voice and touch something. I tap it. It's all I can do to breathe. Talking's impossible. I can hardly see, either. I'm half-buried in rubble and can't move. And my arms... are just *an* arm now.

The attack was so sudden. On the horizon, a cloud of dust appeared, and from it came a horde of charging vampires. I'd never seen such numbers. The sergeant shouted something about thousands, and someone else shouted back about tens of thousands. There were just so many. It was obvious from the moment I saw them that it was useless. We were all going to die. I even forgot how to breathe, and ended up just continually sucking in air. It was painful.

Nevertheless, I remembered the sergeant's words and ran. I did what I could, and tried to warn as many people as possible. "Head to the underground shelters and cave rooms!" I yelled. I urged them to hide. While carrying an old lady on my back and pulling a child by the hand, I did what I could.

I am a soldier; I will die. It is my destiny. But the people who aren't soldiers don't have to suffer the same fate. It's my job to sacrifice myself so they can survive. With that thought in mind, I ran around doing my job. Eventually, my chest began to feel hot. Tears dripped from my eyes, but I kept doing the best I could.

Later, I grabbed my spear along with my brethren and stood against the vampires. We were going to be brave and perform our duty as an army. We would fight, even if we knew we wouldn't win.

However, I'm not cool like those knights... so I got taken out really quickly. One of them grabbed my arm, flung me about, and tossed me.

I hit something; it hurt like hell. I nearly fainted. I was paralyzed. I could only listen to the sounds of my brethren fighting. I'd mustered up my courage, prepared myself for death... and then this happened.

I couldn't even become kindling for the fire. I'm so lame.

"Mulaso, lad... a job well done."

Ah, he's going to scold me until the end. Whatever, it's fine. As long as I don't have to die alone... I'm so happy to feel human contact.

"Your spear hit true. It was impressive."

I... feel like this is praise. Is the sergeant smiling?

"The vampire you fought was a big deal. An Apostle! A beast named Crumbling Mountain. That monster leveled homes, walls, and mountains... yet your spear hit true."

Really? I got taken out so quickly, though... Was I at least a little helpful, then?

"You can pass on with pride. You did all you could. You, me, the other men... we're all gonna die here, but God will praise us. He'll tell us we did a bang-up job."

His voice is strained, like he's suffering. The convulsing I'd felt in my fingertips has now disappeared. Oh, the sergeant... and the others... Our army is gone.

What about the citizens? What happened to that old lady? What happened to the children? Come on, voice, I need to ask, or I'll never be able to pass on in peace.

"...The citizens will be fine. The vampires seemed to be in a hurry."

Good. I can only hope that's true. Please, let it be true. Otherwise, it would be my only regret.

Oh, God. You who so love Lady Kuroi; the God of Humanity. I know I pray and ask for a lot, but this is the last time... Please, please, give your blessing to those who are suffering. Bless those frightened children. Create a world where they can all live happily... Deus Ex.

Ah... I can see a flame. A warm, beautiful flame...

It's my turn to join you.

54 The Priest Calculates and Arranges for the Final Battle, so that Humanity Will Not Fall

God's presence is strengthening. The flames burn redder. Battle. A great battle is just over the horizon.

-Father Felipo I-

"Yo! I just heard some crazy news! That soldier was a messenger, wasn't he?!" Odysson is heaving after sprinting into my office, so I offer him a cup of water.

"Indeed he was. I shall explain, but first please have some of this."

I pour myself a cup as well, and drink letting the water sit in my mouth, then swallowing slowly; it helps to quell the fire burning in my chest.

After a pause, I continue. "A large number of vampires attacked from the west and are making their way south." It burns my tongue to even utter that statement. "Reports say they were led by the Apostle Crumbling Mountain. They cut through the western lands with the speed of a comet, assaulted the city housing our refugees in search of supplies, and then drilled and carved a path through the Sacred Shield Mountains."

The cup in Odysson's hand quakes. The water spilling from it clearly reveals his mental state: shock and fear. I know how you feel, my man.

"A-And the people...?"

"Very few were spared from the disaster." I lament.

"You said they carved through the mountain?"

"They made use of an earthen magic on a scale the likes of which has never been seen before." My throat is so parched, and my interlaced fingers are about to crush each other from how tight my grip is. I can't even reach for the water jug; I'm so tense. "After entering the plains, the vampire army split in two." A sharp pain shoots through my lips. No amount of saliva can keep them from drying out. My breath is so warm and moist, too. "We still don't have information on which group Crumbling Mountain is leading, but we believe one is heading east for the fort. Their progress is slow, but this

most likely means that the damage to the nearby towns is immense.”

The sourcing of supplies from locals—expressed in military terms, that’s all it really is... but reality is much more gruesome. I can’t even find the words to describe how horrific it is. Odysson’s face has gone from green to sheet white, and with good reason. Unfortunately, I must be the bearer of even more despair-inducing news:

“As for the other group, they are proceeding at a forced march to the southeast.”

His shoulders twitch. I knew he’d be able to discern what those words imply.

“Wait, does that mean...”

“Yes. I believe they are targeting the palace.”

A wordless cry reaches my ears. I won’t berate him for being melodramatic, though, for I too let out a silent scream when I guessed their trajectory.

Our country—the one nation we humans managed to build up, the Tryus Nation... is on the verge of destruction. This is an absolutely certain fact; a grim reality we can do nothing to stop. For those of us who have abandoned the central government—or perhaps it is we who were abandoned—this truth is especially clear.

An era is about to end with a great, great human loss.

“Th-The knights... The royal army could...” Odysson mutters.

“Have you forgotten? We are the only ones who have been able to fend off an army of a thousand vampires thanks to receiving God’s blessing.”

“Th-They have the Church; surely they...”

“Frankly speaking, the conventional religion is wrong. That long period of history in which we had no God only served to further our praying techniques. Without a doubt, our tradition and understanding were distorted by the Church. Hope is out of the question.”

I won’t criticize them. I can’t; not when I’ve only just learned of the true God. Religion is about facing God, but religious sects are human-facing organizations; one must consider each separately. To never err is not necessarily to always do the right thing. What salvation can there be in telling a parent whose child has been eaten that there is no God?

However, the real issue is that we require a true faith in order to combat the vampires. Thus, it goes without saying that a revolution must take place—a religious revolution. I was certain that we could secure the time needed for this radical change by fighting north of the fort, but... What imprudence.

Suddenly, the sound of rushed galloping comes from outside. The fact that they’ve come directly to me means it’s urgent, bad news. Boots on rock echo, followed by the sound of a sword clinking in its

sheath. They fling open the door without even a knock—why, it's Origis! What a sight he is. The presence of the battlefield radiates from his body.

"While on patrol, we rescued a rider who was attacked by a vampire."

"A v-vampire? What—" Odysson splutters.

"The rumors were correct... whether they invade from the north or the west, it makes no difference. Our enemy is penetrating the northern lands," Origis announces.

"So the war has escalated that far, huh? And what of the rider you saved?" I ask.

"A messenger from the Hell Expanse. Didn't mean to snub you, but I took the report personally. His letter was too bloody from his wounds..."

"Titles and position mean nothing among us."

With the imminent fall of the nation, words carry much weight. For the nobles in the capital, who are crushed by despair, position and titles are all they have to live for. Even in a state of emergency, they continue their comical dance, much like those under the demon of narcotics.

"So, Origis. What did the Commander have to say?"

Lord Willow's decision to stay in the Hell Expanse... it cannot be just for the convenience of the position. Did he learn something in a prisoner interrogation? Or did he receive a message from God?

"My brother can be quite... brusque at times, but according to one of his prisoners, there is an army of thirty thousand vampires heading south from the center of the continent."

For the first time, I'm at a loss for words. Thirty thousand vampires. If we include their familiars, that's potentially a force of sixty thousand total. If they charged at us with those numbers, we would be crushed, even if every single man we have fought. We are facing the literal end of humanity.

"Hey, Father. Is this...?" Odysson starts.

"Yes. First, they are without a doubt cooperating with the southern invasion force. Those to the north of the fort are about to be trapped in a massive pincer attack," I reply.

"My brother thought the same. However, son Peine seems to have taken his conjecture one step further," says Origis.

"Oh? What does my friend have to say?" I inquire.

"Their target is Lady Kuroi," he discloses.

Ah, I see. Yes, that is possible. He has fought them on the battlefield; surely he has some unique insight into this. It would also line up with previous reports.

If the vampires were after Lady Kuroi, that would reveal their

crafty plan.

First, choosing the wide western front as a battlefield allows them to lay the groundwork for this strategy, and dip their toes in the proverbial water. Whether Lady Kuroi shows up or not is of no consequence. However, if she does appear, it gives them the chance to analyze her battle prowess for a bit before retreating. This initial force was never going to be strong enough to defeat an Apostle, so it's only natural.

Second, they send an army to the Hell Expanse. This army is not there to attack any towns, but simply exists to threaten us, and act as a lure for Lady Kuroi. Then, they root themselves there. An effective plan with little cost.

Third, once the first and second steps are successful, they execute their brilliant plan. Now that they are familiar with the wide plains, they send about ten thousand troops charging deep into our territory, without any human hindrance. With Lady Kuroi distracted, they can do that no problem. Crumbling Mountain's powers allow them to carve through the mountains and enter the southern territory.

Finally, they attack the fort from the south and cut off Lady Kuroi's retreat, then crush her with their main force from the north.

I see... Now I understand. I sense the Demon God's hand in this. And destroying the human nation as a bonus? How evil! They mean to kill Lady Kuroi only after plunging her into the deepest of despairs.

"May I continue? There's more," asks Origis.

Oh! It seems I got lost in thought there for a bit; how complacent of me. I pour a cup of water and offer it to him. And you, Odysson, get a hold of yourself, man!

"The prisoner clued in the possibility that the northern force could be commanded by Thunderstorm."

"That seems suspect," I remark after a pause.

"Oh, it's far more than 'suspect.' As if the yellow-eyes would send all of their Apostles here! Even if it is true, the long-ears won't just sit idly by," Odysson interjects.

"Logically speaking, I agree. Nevertheless, Lady Kuroi stated that Thunderstorm was leading them until at least the halfway point," reports Origis.

What? Why, that's...

"Oh, and one last thing: Crumbling Mountain is heading south, according to Lady Kuroi."

"Whoa... Whoa, whoa, whoa! Is that...?"

"True? Yes, I'd say there's no room for doubt."

She is God's oracle, after all, isn't she? The question is, should we be trembling with gratitude for this information; or be shivering at the severity of our situation, which is precarious enough for God to step in

Himself? It is a good question indeed. One thing is for certain: humanity's survival depends on our decision here.

"Mmh, that's good water. Odysson, you should have some. Also, you don't have to grip your cup so tightly," says Origis.

"R-Right... You sure seem calm. Is it your military training?"

"It's because I'm a ranked officer; I don't need to understand the big picture. Just point me to the battlefield and I'm good. I'll risk my life fighting, as usual."

"Even so..."

"I have a God to serve, who has granted us an Apostle. My commander is trustworthy, and my battle buddies are reliable. I would have no regrets dying alongside my men. This is a warrior's true desire."

Hee hee! That loquaciousness, and the look he shoots me. I should have expected nothing less of Lord Willow's younger brother. Yes, I understand. Let us find you a battlefield—a grand stage for our revolution.

"I will use this information to negotiate with the elves," I assert. They cannot stay on the sidelines; I will drag Ten Thousand Bells, Deep Sea, and Absolute into this kicking and screaming if I have to. The Demon and Dragon Gods can make their appearances as well. Then, they can all die. That is our goal—no, our minimum requirement. "I am sure it will take much deliberating, but once it is done we shall head south."

"Right, I see. There's no point in staying here. I just hope the long-ears understand that."

"I will make them understand. Golden's destruction was a great victory for us. Thunderstorm was always an opponent that the elves should have taken on, anyway. You could even call it a duty. Don't worry, they will show their pride—the pride of the Ewlogond Republic."

It must be some bit of lingering attachment that makes me use their nation's name... or maybe it's a complaint. After all, we are about to lose our country. It was rotten to the core, of course, but it was the system I was born and raised in. I cannot help but love and hate it equally.

The memories of certain places come flooding back to me: the streets of the capital, the spires of the palace, the chapel of the Church. As a young lad, those buildings seemed to me like the crystallization of humanity's intellect. I believed that the world of the humans was beautiful.

I'm not about to sit idly by and let it all be crushed underfoot, like some sort of blunder.

"We will defeat Crumbling Mountain's army with great speed. I

will not allow a long, drawn-out battle,” declares Origis.

“I mean, that’s nice but...” Odysson mumbles.

“The longer this takes, the more danger we are put in.”

Fighting a war of attrition while stepping on the corpse of our nation would be a nightmare. Our supplies would be uncertain, and the chaos that follows the collapse of the government would crush us.

“Once we’ve defeated Crumbling Mountain, we will mount a counter-invasion against the Demon God.”

The perfect plan... Deus Ex.

Right now, the only way for humanity to survive is through an all-out offensive, with our lives on the line.

55 The Strange and Weird of DDR, Plus Playing with a Handicap

When God's heart moves, my heart also moves.
When my heart moves, does God's heart also move?

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 7-

Huh? My phone's saying: "The number you have dialed is out of reach. Please try again." Whuh? You dare mock me, phone?!

Hey guys, it's PotatoStarch.

What's going on here? Whoa, my VoIP phone isn't working either. Whenever I try to post on a message board, horror movie-like things occur, and all my emails spit back errors like they're possessed by a demon. Ahhh, I'm stranded in a corner of the city!

Oh, but I can order a pizza online with a few clicks. See? Done. No problem, then... Yeah, right. This isn't funny! I can't even click the stop recording button for this video. Once I do, they'll see it. They might even be watching right now. I should be scared out of my mind (and I *am* kinda scared) but I guess that, as a streamer, I'm used to this. Weird... I even have enough presence of mind to remember parts that I want to edit in the video later.

Having said that, I'm still uneasy. One of the best ways to calm down is to do something you're used to, so... *click click*. I've been having Kuroi do high-speed lateral jumps. While that's been going on, I've also been observing a certain character... what is going on?

"Ugh, so weird... What are those movements? A ritual? Trying to curse someone?"

She's a beautiful woman in dark clothes. Thanks to the lanterns lighting her up from all sides, I have a really good view of her. That dynamite body, the underground cell setting, the handcuffs... I'm getting major immoral vibes here.

Hmm... The line from her waist to her butt is wonderful; beautiful and erotic.

"Guh... This crazy presence... The Demon God!" She is disgusted.

This is the named unit we took prisoner in the last battle. Tamika, I think her name was? The first unusual thing about her is her race. What's a dhampir? A web search tells me they're half-vampire, half-human hybrids. But that doesn't make sense. The vampires in DDR can't have children; they're all artificial creatures made with test tubes and cultivation pods. The Demon Castle's Birthing Factory is basically like Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. Sci-fi and horror combined; it's a real mash-up of genres.

"I've given you enough info, haven't I? What else do you want me to tell you?"

"...About your mixed blood," asks Kuroi.

"H-How... How do you...?"

"I just do."

“You ‘just do’? That’s... impossible!”

Her stats are weird, too. Her Demon God faith is zero. Instead, it says ‘Spirit Believer.’ See? Right there. And, probably related, her magic is ‘dark magic.’ What the heck? That’s so... edgy. There’s Shadow Vision, Sinking Shadow, and Shadow Swallow. What a variety. She has lots of tricks up her sleeves, kinda like a ninja.

“Dark and... shadow?” Kuroi is slightly confused.

“Well, that explains this jail set-up; fire magic seals my shadows...”

I do recall finding her curled up behind a shield on the battlefield. The minimap radar made her position painfully obvious, though, so a few pokes with my sword were enough for her to pop right out.

“A life hidden in the shadows,” observes Kuroi.

“Yes, that’s right. I live in the world’s shadows; I’m of mixed blood. My father was a vampire reproduction test subject, and my mother was an incubator candidate given to him... basically food.”

That must be new content from the DX version. It’s similar to the relation between elves and dark elves, if you consider the “dark” aspect.

“That experiment was just a way for the Demon God to kill time; after less than a hundred years she grew bored and abandoned it. Years later, from the darkness where no stars can be seen, I was born. It was a cursed, miraculous birth.”

“Cursed and miraculous?”

“You wouldn’t understand. You were born a human, and you were raised as a human among other humans. How could you understand the pain of watching your mother suffer over having to eat her own kind, and then being forced to eat them yourself?!”

Hmm... Now, this definitely isn’t just because she’s pretty, but I genuinely sympathize with her—with Tamika. DDR sure has a way of tugging at your heartstrings; making you unable to ignore fictitious backstories. Even now, there’s a stinging sadness spreading in my chest.

“I never knew my parents. My home was flooded. I lived as a slave.”

“I... Well, you’re still an Apostle, aren’t you?” Tamika counters.

“I gave everything I had to fight.”

“You can say whatever you want; the Apostles I know don’t even have real names.”

“God gave me my current name.”

“Is that so...? Well.”

In my mind, I know this isn’t the time to be doing this. I have IRL dangers to face, and in-game I should be focusing on humanity’s army instead of getting lost in some NPC’s backstory. The Apostle markers

on my minimap tell a really horrible story. This position, this movement... Crumbling Mountain is heading for the palace.

"Are you sure you have the time to be here talking to me?"

"I don't fight alone."

"Heh... You're their only target, though."

"Just me?"

"More accurately, you and the treasure. But as far as human targets, yes, you're the only one."

"Treasure?"

"Don't humans have one too? A treasure with a spirit sealed inside it? It should be the symbol of your race."

"...Fire?"

"Yeah. The Primal Ash. The human king has it, doesn't he?"

In other words, if the palace falls, humanity's defeat is basically guaranteed; our fire magic would become incredibly weak. At least, that's how it worked in my elf playthrough of the regular DDR. The elemental symbols of wind and water, the Ancestral Tree and Tide Jewel, were stolen, and we became unable to wield magic. Eventually, that forced me to give up on a counterattack.

"The vampires have two of these, too: the Source Crystal, which they stole from the dwarves, and the Heaven's Candle, which they took from the insectors. Each of these treasures contains a powerful spirit sealed within," Tamika explains.

"Spirits..."

"They're the source of magic in this world, and governors of the laws of nature. When it comes to magic, even the Divine Blessings only serve to amplify the spirits' powers. The gods are just invalid masters."

"Invalid?"

"Don't you get it? In this world, there were originally no such things as 'gods.' The spirits were worshiped through their treasures, until the Demon God appeared and twisted the world."

All the more reason for me to stop Crumbling Mountain.

"Once Crumbling Mountain secures the treasure, he'll come after you, the Devil God's Apostle."

Could I still make it? No, I'd never make it. I'm not being defeatist, it's a simple matter of distance. A horse couldn't travel that distance fast enough, and neither could an elven flier. There's nothing I can do.

"The finishing touch to humanity's destruction is you. Apostles are focuses for elemental magic. The fire magic that the Devil God controls takes form via your own life... and after She's taken you and the treasure, the Demon God will have a third power. Once that happens, then all is lost."

“Thunder, earth... fire.”

“Fire can resist water. It’ll be no time at all before She’s got water and wind under her control as well. In that sense, your death could start the end of the world.”

“The end of the world?”

“Everything will die and turn to ash, I’m sure of it.”

No. I’ve come so far; I don’t want it to be game over yet. I don’t want to see the Demon God laughing again. All that hard work the people of the Frontier did, belittled... And then, they’ll all die, every last one of them...

“Th-This heat... What are you thinking of doing?” Tamika asks nervously.

Kuroi dying? No. No! I won’t let it happen!

“Ahhh! It’s hot! The lanterns are exploding! My shadows! Even the shadows in my sleeves are cowering... Is the dark spirit afraid?!”

It’s fine. I don’t have to make it in time. Who cares if I can’t use fire magic anymore? I am PotatoStarch, the most dexterous clicker in all the land.

“Huh? Yuck! Oh, save me! I knew you were doing some kind of ritual!”

Behold! I’m dancing in a circle only using lateral jumps! It’s almost like I’ve got shadow clones!

There’s nothing to worry about; all we have to do is defeat Crumbling Mountain with Kuroi’s massive stats and my expert player skills. No fire magic? Bring it on! Handicaps are a true gamer’s wheelhouse. I can do this... I *will* do it! I’ll crush Crumbling Mountain magnificently and recover the Primal Ash; that’ll solve everything!

“Lady Kuroi! If you don’t stop, the prisoner is going to die!” shouts a male voice.

Hm? When did the hot knight get here? What’s the matter? Mmh? Tamika’s fainted, too. What did I miss?

“What intense fire! No, is this a revelation from God?” he wonders.

Oh, hey. If I stick with the hot knight and his boys, I won’t have to worry about anything I come across on the road slowing me down. You’ll still need to eat, drink, and sleep on a never-ending march.

“I bring good news: Father Felipe has formed a temporary military pact with the elves. They shall intercept the army of thirty thousand vampires coming from the north. Ten Thousand Bells and Deep Sea will be there as well; this is a good chance to eliminate Thunderstorm. That means we can march our entire army south.”

Well, if we’re going, then the first order of business is to move as fast as possible towards the fort. Take the shortest route!

By the way, how is Sira doing down there?

Huh? Huh?! Why is my sweet Sira wearing armor?! She's gonna go to battle against the vampire army to the south!

56 The Girl Sheds Tears and Prepares Herself for a Fight to the Death

O God, grant this world fire through me.

Grant us fire so that man's work may never die. Grant us an inferno.

-Sira II-

My armor is custom-made of wood, leather, and chainmail. It's light and easy to move in. However, the helmet is made of steel, so it's heavy, and the chin strap chafes; I can hardly keep my head up while wearing it.

"Wah ha ha! A very heroic look, I must say, Sira!" A man with a shining head arrives. He's the top military man in this fort. He's very loud and always laughing, plus he gives me lots of food. "And I like this thing you've put on your helmet! It's red and wavy, like fire!"

I can't say thank you. I want to, but he won't let me. You see...

"Don't you agree, Lady Ange?" He asks her before I get a chance to speak.

"Yes, General Bandkan, it's a marvelous gift," I compliment him. "As representative of the Northern Frontier, I—WHOA!"

"Ah-hah! Blocked, eh? What a shame!"

...He likes to touch my butt every time I try to say thank you.

"Please, enough with the jokes. We have much to prepare for," I warn him.

"Jokes? You wound me! Very well, let us get married on the eve of our great battle!"

"Please, enough with the jokes. We have much to prepare for," I repeat, ignoring his nonsense.

"Like I said... huh? Lady Ange? Why, what a dangerous smile that is!" he laughs while looking at the Crimson Flower Company lady.

Despite it all, I don't hate this man. In fact, I like him a lot. He listens to me, tells me lots of fun stories, and praises me often. Not to mention...

"Ahem! In any case, I felt the need to express my gratitude to Sira! Not only did she enlighten my soldiers to the existence of God, but she also showed them a very special training method! Furthermore, she now says she'll fight alongside us..."

His eyes remind me a lot of Dad. Deep in his heart, something burns, spilling out of his quiet smile... it's faintly warm, and makes me miss him.

"What sad excuses we are for adults, to be forced to accept a child's help in battle," he laments.

They really are alike; he gets angry and sad on behalf of others. He works hard, ignoring his own needs. I've met many like him, and I've said goodbye to most of them. His type is common among soldiers.

"General, might I say something, though you might find it imprudent?" I ask.

"No, no. Speak your mind."

"Our enemy is fifty thousand strong. Our allies number two thousand cavalry and three thousand foot soldiers. From the numbers alone, even a draw would be..."

"Yes, if we clash head-on, we don't stand a chance. It'd be one vampire for every platoon of men. We'd be overrun easily."

"Even so... must you ride out to battle?"

"We must. This fort was designed with the intention of fighting enemies coming from the north; we are beyond weak to an invasion from the south. It's possible this will be more of a slaughter than a true battle; we can't fight in groups with all the buildings in the way. And a one-on-one battle with a vampire? I can already imagine the gore."

I don't want him to die. I don't want anyone else to die. Everyone here is a good person. They ask me how son Peine is doing; they comment about how gallant Lord Willow is; they tell me that they wish they had a son or a daughter like me, and pat my head; they all smile, but in their eyes, I can see they're all prepared to fight to the death.

God. Oh, God. Does surviving mean you have to keep fighting like this?

"That said, I will need you to stay at our headquarters, Sira. Unfortunately, that is the only way we can use fire magic. Otherwise, it's as good as a dull blade."

"So you mean to make use of Sira after all?" asks the Crimson Flower Company lady.

"I do. We *must* win. There is no possible retreat for humanity at this point. If we fall, the supply trains required to mount a counterattack will be destroyed. Moreover, the plains to the north will turn into a mass graveyard, and all hope... will be lost."

Thinking of Lady Kuroi fills my eyes with tears. I'm fine when we're together, but I can't stand being apart. Just remembering her face lit up by the bonfire... oh, here I go again. But I can't help it; if

we keep fighting, even Lady Kuroi will die eventually.

“Sira, are you crying? What’s the matter, dear? Are you scared?” Ange wants to know.

“I’m always scared.”

“Sira...” the old man trails off.

“I’m not scared of fighting; I can bear the pain. But...”

So many lives... So many deaths weigh on Lady Kuroi’s shoulders as she fights for all our sakes. She works so hard, and burns brighter than anyone else. She’s the greatest flame of all—an inferno granted to us by God to light up this cold, dark world.

“Everyone’s going to die,” I weep.

A flame that burns too bright is beautiful, but leaves nothing behind. I know that her fire is so beautiful because it uses every last bit of fuel; that’s the nature of blinding infernos. Odysseus taught me that.

“I won’t let that happen!” the shiny-headed man barks.

Whoa! That surprised me. Aah, he’s picking me up on his shoulders! He’s so strong; I’m wearing full armor, too.

“This is a massive battle! A time of great danger! Many will die, it’s true! Not even God can stop that! But, Sira, you mustn’t be mistaken. We do not go to battle to die... a warrior fights to prevent death!”

He stomps around, and I sway with every step. I have to keep my helmet on. His shiny head is too slippery for me to get a grip on.

“Behold, our five thousand warriors! Wah ha ha!” Standing on the balcony, we look down into the courtyard. The man laughs loudly. “If we include their mothers and fathers, that’s ten thousand warriors! Of course, some of them are siblings, so that’s just an estimate, but... there’s also their grandparents! That at least quadruples our numbers. Humanity’s unbroken history is on display right here, with these warriors. In other words, they are the product of tens of thousands of ancestral wills!”

Everyone’s looking at us. They’re flying banners and waving their hands at us. Their armor, swords, spears, and eyes are all glittering.

“And, Sira, you are a child. A brave, pious girl whom we all love like a daughter. One could even say that you are humanity’s brightest star. You are the source of our fighting spirit, and the symbol of our will. We will not let you die. Your survival is our victory!”

I want to tell him he’s wrong. I want to tell him that I’m worried about everyone else... but it’s no use. No one here wants to die, but they will anyway. That’s why I can’t say anything. I have to accept their feelings.

Oh, Lady Kuroi... this is your job. It’s so hot. Everyone’s passion is raining down on me... I feel so sad and lonely—my heart is about to

rip in two. It's like I'm burning. Resisting the urge to cry grants me strength. The mana is building up inside me.

"Lady Ange, I've prepared a messenger party and horses. Do you understand?" asks the man.

"If the time comes, Sira and I..."

"Yes. I will burn the fort if it comes to that. We will buy time for Agias to heroically scoop you up. Be sure to tell him of the supplies we've hidden in the mountains."

"I swear on my life."

"Sorry, and thank you. It's not a gigantic cache, but if worst comes to worst, I pray even one cup of soup made from its stores will support humanity's pride, and that each grain, imbued with our citizens' wills, becomes your strength."

I think the fire engulfing me is calling for God. I hug Dad's sword tight. God poured power into this blade. It's hot. It should burn me, but it doesn't; I don't even sweat. It's a strange heat.

"Now, my warriors! It is time for battle!"

Right, I'm coming, too. Ange watches as we march towards the south exit. We go to fight, together. Our footsteps are in harmony. No one cries or is afraid.

"Heavy armor to the center! Form ranks! Cavalry, form two wings!" commands the bald man.

A red banner unfurls and flutters in the wind like a giant fire. I wonder if God is watching. This banner is saying: "We won't lose! Watch over us, God!"

The vampires' banner is black and gold, like lightning at night. I can see lots of them across the field. The gray shacks dotting the horizon are camps made of stone. They're waiting inside them for night to fall. That's when they'll attack.

Which is why now is our time. We have to act now, before many die later.

"All right! My honored fifty knights! Go forth!"

"Yes, sir!" they answer, and spur their horses into a gallop. In their hands are vials of oil. They pour mana into them... Oh, no, the vampires have noticed them! Boulders smash them, they crash into stone walls, holes open underneath their horses' legs—many, many perish. And yet...

They manage to throw their bombs. They've done their best. All over, the vials break and explode into a mass of flames. Some even land inside the stone camps and set them on fire. I can hear the vampires scream.

Only nine knights return.

Even so, everyone bangs their swords against their shields and cheers loudly. "We did it!" they cry.

“Good, good! An excellent first strike! Behold! The blood-sucking badgers are afraid of the fire! Wah ha ha ha haa!”

He can't be happy. He can't be celebrating... yet he smiles. To smile is to fight as well.

Moving on to the next assault, another troop of a hundred soldiers gallops forth. Again, they're unable to get close before dying, but they still unleash their bombs. About half of them return.

“What's the matter? Not going to counterattack? Cowards! I figured as much! You had to dig a detour through an entire mountain because you were afraid of the fort our army defends! All you can do is attack defenseless towns! Weaklings! Wah ha ha!”

The soldiers nod in agreement. They move. Oh! The vampires are coming. So many. An incredibly large number of them approaches.

“Center soldiers, maintain position! Those to the left and right, back up! Cavalry, form an opening!”

I'm in the center, so those of us here have to stand their ground. The soldiers in the front line set their shields in position, forming a wall, and dig into the earth with their feet. The rear line of soldiers brace their backs. Some grip spears in their hands; others, oil vials. United, we wait.

“We are the army of the fort! Defenders of humanity! Let yourselves be heard, men!”

Shouts and noises fill the air. Humans and vampires collide. It feels like the world itself is shaking; like my soul is being compressed. We push and are pushed back, losing little by little. We're going to be squished, and yet...

“Push! Puuush!” the shiny-headed man shouts. I push on his butt, too.

I won't lose. We won't lose!

57 The Merchant Watches Brave Men Fight / The Girl Fights, Warm and Protected

I offer everything I have; burn my life away to nothing.
I will show the world my rage. I will make sure they see it.

-Merchant Ange II-

My fists tremble—my lips quiver as I bite down on them.

“Lady Ange, why don’t you sit down?”

“General Bandkan ordered me to stand here. It is my duty.”

“Preserving your stamina is also part of your mission.”

“It would be a waste of energy to bend down and sit.”

I refuse to turn and look at the messenger; my gaze is locked to the south. I can’t take a single step from this observation tower. Fear has already overwhelmed me.

This battle... It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

General Bandkan himself said they can’t win in a head-on fight... but I never expected them to come out of the gates swinging with suicide squads. Dozens of men have already died attempting to taunt the vampires. Those giving orders and those receiving orders are equally calm and resolute. They’re also equally crazy, taking the brunt of the vampires’ fierce attack with their center column of soldiers.

Sira’s right there! What are the foot soldiers and cavalry on the sides doing? They’re withdrawing, scattering! Not even trying to help! Oh, see? See?! The enemy is focusing on the center column now. They’re practically surrounded. Soldier after soldier is crushed, shield and all, by attacking vampires from the front and sides. However, a new soldier is always there to fill the gaps, so the vampires switch to using their fearsome physical strength to leap over them instead.

They should have known this would happen. The first vampire to scale the shields is... trapped by shields on all sides and lit on fire with oil?! Now they slice him in two with a sword... he turns to ash. Is that their plan? No, I don’t think so. They... They’re being pushed back hard, steadily losing ground—but they aren’t crumbling. It’s a resoluteness filled with purpose. And I know why: General Bandkan is there to directly order the sealing of each hole in the wall of shields,

so their coordination hasn't fallen to pieces yet. Even so, it's a miracle they can keep their morale up while being pushed back.

Sira's there, right in the center. The soldiers are grouped up tightly to protect her. This isn't some last-ditch battle; it's beyond heroic—a testament to the power of a parent protecting their child.

Nevertheless, the soldiers keep falling... they can't hope to equal the vampires in strength. Regardless, the center column refuses to say die. In fact, their formation is getting even tighter. What a crazy strategy: using the enemy's pressure from three sides as a defensive tool! There's no predicting the outcome of this battle anymore, and yet... What is the reason for the retreat?

Oh... I see. What a strategist General Herman Bandkan is. I'd heard he was rigid and uncompromising, but this... The central column is also withdrawing, but seen from a different angle, one could say they are drawing in the enemy's entire offensive force—luring them into position. It's a trap! With this, they might be able to wipe out all the vampires.

The foot soldiers to the sides bellow and charge, clashing against the vampires' flanks while the cavalry come roaring from behind. They're very quick to collapse on this opportunity—see? Now the vampires are completely surrounded. Injured, collapsed soldiers also dot the vampires' ranks; no one is left unharmed. Our men might not have been able to get a hang of Sira's training, but they certainly know how to pack their bombs full of mana. These aren't normal explosives, either—they're high-explosive bombs. Created in the south, they've yet to reach the Frontier.

I hear orders being barked and the banging of drums—the counterattack has begun. Simultaneously, the soldiers strike. Spears pierce the vampires from all sides. The cavalry charges, unleashing their bombs. Flames and explosions erupt. All of a sudden, the battle is nearly even. One of our injured soldiers runs towards the middle of the enemy's ranks, bombs gripped in both hands. He's followed by two more, then three. They keep coming.

Merciless fire. Roaring explosions. Bone-shattering impacts.

Our men throw everything they have, literally, at the vampires in order to crush them utterly.

I mustn't cry. I *must* hold my tears in. It is my duty to watch them from this spot; to burn the image of these honest, proud, and wonderful men into my memory. I shall become a record of their proud lives and deaths, engraving their story upon my soul.

Oh, God. Please grant them your blessing. I pray that our desperate, earnest efforts lead to hope.

“Wah ha ha! The vampires fell right into our trap!” the man cries, his smooth and shiny head covered by his helmet. We’re right in the middle of combat. “Attack! Attack! This is our last chance to shine!”

I’m watching everyone with eyes wide open. I don’t dare blink.

“General! It’s been a pleasure serving you!” a soldier shouts.

“Go, my man! Into the other side of the flame!” the man shouts back.

A mustachioed soldier runs off, gripping two fire bombs in his hands. The man watches with a smile as the soldier goes, then cheers once he hears the sound of the explosions.

“Sira, you better survive! General, make sure she does!” cries another warrior.

“Wa ha ha! No need to tell me twice! Leave the rest to me!”

“Yes, sir!” His arm and shield completely smashed, he grabs a spear in his remaining hand. Gripping the bound rope of a bomb in his mouth, he, too, runs off. I watch as he goes.

Everyone’s dying. One-by-one, they all die. But even so, they fight. The fighting just never ends.

“General, please move back a little! An enemy unit is charging!”

“So they move forward, even when surrounded, huh? Cursed vampires. They’re complete monsters. They fight like their only purpose is to wipe out every last one of us. Don’t give them an opening! Support your brothers!”

The vampires: creatures with brown skin and yellow eyes. They worship the Demon God and treat humans like food. Unlike them, I was able to talk to an elf. Ten Thousand Bells was such a good musician. She even brought me tea and snacks... she was very kind. Our religions, lifestyles, and beliefs were different, but I felt that we could get along. So why can’t it be the same way with the vampires? Lady Kuroi and Golden were able to talk, but not get along. Is fighting our only option?

God. Oh, God. Why do You and the other gods fight? Don’t You ever talk things out? Is the world so sad that nothing can be accomplished without killing someone?

Oh! A stone wall. That’s vampire magic. It’s so tall. It’s about to fall, too. They’re going to use it as a bridge to attack us—I know this strategy.

“Sira?!” cries the bald man’s voice.

I have to do something before it falls; before someone else dies. I *have* to be like Lady Kuroi.

Go, Dad!

He draws the sword I’ve been hugging, sparkles with red mana, and moves out. I can faintly see his great back. Swiftly, he slices through the stone wall—I hear something crumbling. The stone is

falling to pieces.

“Ohhh! Well done! Look, the enemy is stunned! Feed them your spears!” barks the man.

I did it. I did it, Dad! I can fight too. Look, another stone wall. Cut it for me! This is how I can save everyone. Keep going! There’s another one over there. And that one too, please. Wow! My dad’s so strong... huh? Wah!

“Sira, you mustn’t let your guard down on the battlefield!” yells the shiny-headed man. He protected me from a vampire that jumped towards me. His helmet is ripped off, and there’s blood everywhere.

Ah... Ahh! His left arm... it’s gone from the shoulder down.

“It’s all right for children to fail; it’s a necessary step to becoming a great adult,” he says with a gentle voice.

He doesn’t attempt to fight the vampire with a club charging at us. He’s rooted right in front of me. Instead, the other soldiers fight. So many spears, swords, and shields. However, the vampire is too strong. It swings its club and shouts, summoning thunder magic. The spell grows stronger and stronger.

“...But that is why adults must be proud and cool!”

The man throws his sword—it flies so fast. Still, the vampire knocks it away with its club. The lightning dissipates, though, allowing everyone’s spears through. They pierce it, and it dies.

“Yessss!” shout the men.

The General smiles, but doesn’t move. He can’t move. While protecting me, he got hit with that club charged with electricity. Soon, he’ll...

“Sira, stay by your father’s side; that’s where you’ll be safest.”

Right. Dad’s back. Look, his sword is burning red. God’s heat is within it.

“Good... Now, go. Live. I’ll watch over you from here.”

Right, I have to go. The cool shiny-headed man watches as I leave, my dad and some soldiers in tow. Don’t worry, I won’t drop my guard anymore. I’ll stay sharp. I’ll work hard to end this everlasting war that started so long ago. I’ll work hard so that I can one day smile and see all the people that left before me.

Oh, God, I’m going to fight under your banner of fire.

58 About DDR Fast Movement / The Merchant Celebrates, Entrusting Her Life

My life is filled with heat. God's power flows into me.
Run. Run! Fly! Like a comet in the sky!

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 8-

So what if my pizza is cold? Who cares if it's dry and gone bad? Little Sira is fighting! She's fighting hard on a gory battlefield I've become all too accustomed to seeing in DDR. Against vampires, too!

Is watching her through the servant viewer window really all I can do? Ah! Look out! Whoa, the vampire that jumped out of the flames just got cut in half with a sword! This guardian spirit guy Sira's got sure has some presence for just being an Accept Arm spell.

Sira is strong, of course. She's an Apostle's servant, after all. Some nameless vampire isn't going to pose a problem for her. She can use summoning magic, and her favorite sword has an attribute bonus as well. But that's only in a one-versus-one situation. A whole army versus one is too dangerous... Ah, see?! Phew... Nice assist, NPC soldier; good spear thrust. She almost got caught off guard after her last attack. Man, this is nerve-wracking.

After all, they're only human. In the DDR sense, I mean. No matter how high their stats get, they can't beat the divine blessing of physical strength given to the vampires. Our stamina just isn't enough against their muscles. Plus, Sira's just a little girl; one blow would end it all.

She needs to dodge—dodge like she's never done before. In hand-to-hand combat with a vampire, you gotta float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. On the strategy sites, they recommend picking away at the enemy with an elven wind magic warrior, out-boxing style.

But allow me to propose a new theory for this DX version of the game: a human fire magic warrior. This is the best way to fight them. The fire attribute really works wonders against vampires, allowing you to deal big damage and cut through them easily. Personally, what I focus on are sneak attacks and one-shot kills. If that fails, I fall back to a hit-and-away style that relies on Kuroi's high speed stat. Ideally, I cast Metabolize to raise my base stamina.

In other words, it is a strategy completely based around Kuroi's skills. She's the strongest vampire hunter! That wasn't exactly my goal at first—in fact, I never imagined I'd get fire magic—but I eventually started building around it. It doesn't hurt that Accept Blade gives me a lot of utility, either.

And the fact is, Kuroi defeated the strongest vampire. I was mega-drunk at the time, so I don't remember much, but her effectiveness was quite obvious after watching the recorded video. I still can't believe she won, though. Golden was an enemy we desperately needed to defeat, but she was still tough.

What is this strange unease in my chest? This odd feeling like there's something I'm missing? It's as if there's something pasted on the back of my joy... Is it guilt? Maybe it's because of that dream. And I know, no one likes to hear about other people's dreams. However, there's just something about Golden and Deep Sea...

It's just a game, but there was real hate behind their attacks. Games are meant to be fun, so why am I feeling so stressed? Even now, I'm pulling out my hair in worry for Sira; I might even throw up... Maybe I'm just hungry, but I don't feel like eating my pizza. How can I, when Kuroi's not eating? She's on a forced march, with no time for food or drink. She's been riding all alone from the Hell Expanse on her summoned steed, Chocolate Pudding—Oh God, why did I name it that?! Now I'm drooling—and making one mad dash after another. As soon as her horse falters and falls, she immediately resummons another one. Talk about a brutal, long-distance run.

The burden on Kuroi is great, too—she's exhausted. Metabolize is helping, but there's still a limit. Even so...

Go. Go, Kuroi! Get to the fort! Get to Sira as fast as you can!

Night is falling; the time when the vampires' rule is close at hand. I will save Sira, I swear it!

-Merchant Ange III-

I can't believe it. What happened? Our offense was working so well.

"Lady Ange, please get ready."

They're monsters. The vampires are truly terrifying monsters. Our attack was so fierce, and yet their morale seems completely unaffected; not one of them has run away. Drunk on blood, delighting in death, they find joy on the battlefield. They kill our men, eating their flesh and slurping their blood.

Sira, you've been fighting these monsters for so long, with no time to rest. She's at the very center of the fort's army, drowning in a sea of death comprising both ally and enemy.

"General Bandkan ordered us to light the fort on fire if they weren't able to wipe out the enemy army by nightfall... we're out of time," laments the messenger behind me.

"They've defeated so many! Must we really?"

"Of course. Even an invasion squad of ten vampires would turn the fort into a bloodbath. At that point, escaping would be too dangerous; they have an excellent night vision and sense of smell."

"Is... Is there no hope of victory?"

"...Please hurry. The horses are already loaded up."

So this is what it means to go to war with vampires. This

absurdity, this powerlessness...

The sky is beginning to darken. Night will be upon us soon, as if trying to hasten humanity's end. Detached and beautiful, it silently looks down upon our deaths.

Oh, God. Why? Why is the world so cruel?

We humans cannot live alone. Being drawn to each other is what makes us human. To be human is to love and be loved. To bear children; to protect and raise a family. That's the extent of our natural lifespan, isn't it? And having achieved that, then we should face our... natural death, right? Such life and death is happiness, is it not? But reality—human reality—is to lose those you love, yet still love others and be forced to leave them behind; equal parts meeting and farewell... There are too many lives being taken, like they're being harvested. Too many heartrending partings.

Are humans simply born to suffer? Please, tell me that's not so. Give me a sign that says it's not—that human life and death isn't pitiful, but beautiful and wonderful.

"Lady Ange, we cannot wait. Please, take our wills north."

"N-North?" I look towards the horizon.

"Yes. A few days' ride should see you intersecting with Lord Willow's army as they head south. Please do not forget to tell them about the mountain stores."

"She's come... She's come!"

"L-Lady Ange?"

I can see her. Underneath the reddening sky, at the edge of the horizon, a lone rider gallops upon the plains. Such speed. Such strength. Even from a distance, I can see her raven hair whipping in the wind and the burning fire in her eyes.

"The gates! Open the gates! Make it so she can come straight this way!" I shout.

"What are you talking about? Th-That... That rider..."

"She's come! That girl... Our Apostle! Mounted on her horse that overcomes even death itself!"

"O-Oh! Ohhh! Oh, God!"

The messenger runs off, shouting repeatedly in excitement. The northern and southern gates are opening, but they're so vexingly slow. Can't you see she's coming? She's almost here!

She gallops through the fort like a flying spear. What few soldiers left inside cheer her on. I cheer as well. I pray that my voice may become the wind at her back; I offer my life's energy to her. I shout, tears streaming down my face.

This is His answer. *This* is His sign.

There is hope, and it exists right here. How precious it is! Please, Kuroi. We know God through you; that is the role of Apostles. Where

your happiness lies, I cannot say, but you... You have the right to do whatever you want with our lives. You can even take mine if you like. If it'll make you stronger, then that's fine—I want to become your strength.

Deus Ex. I pray for your victory. Deus Ex.

59 About DDR Battlefields / The Middle Brother Senses Death

God's rage and sadness fill my heart.

The strength He's blessed me with, His emotions are in all of it.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 9-

Into the fray I charge at 70 km/h for a dynamic how-do-you-do! My appetite is back, by the way! Charging at full speed, I Ignite my dual blades, and split not an enemy, but the entire enemy army in half. Get close and I'll turn you to ash, you bastards! I am Kuroi, hear me roar!

I can't stop her, and I don't want to. There's no time—and not just because the sun's setting; I'm running out of time on a lot of things. Kuroi's stamina is nearly empty, and her mana won't last much longer, either. There's no telling when my fire magic might just give out, too, since the vampires are advancing on the palace. Not having Ignite would be bad, but without Metabolize I'm screwed. If Kuroi passes out, it's all over.

I know I'm pushing it. This is clearly crazy. Of that, I'm confident. But I made it. Somehow, I made it; just gotta give a little more. Let's finish this quickly, Kuroi! Come, my warriors! Call Einherjar! Rise from my horse's shadow! Fill the gap Kuroi cut open for you! Form ranks in the center of the enemy army! No need for mercy or common sense! Now, let them go ham on auto! Beat 'em to a pulp!

You're too slow, vampires. I don't even need to break your Earth Walls or Stone Shields; I can just dodge them. Oh, and good luck trying to hit me with those Stone Bullets and Thunderbolts. I'm just that fast!

Whoa! They still jump at me. I guess I should have expected that. *Slice!* I cleanly repel one. Countering jump attacks is the most basic of basics. I've got a bit of history in fighting games, you see. At least, enough to look like I know what I'm doing. These anti-air strats are easy to pull off.

Now, Kuroi, keep going! Tear this battlefield to shreds! Ruin this fight in no time at all! This is just too cruel to let go on. It's almost like I'm looking at Hell itself: burned fields filled with corpses and ash... A classic DDR sight, of course, but... such destruction. It's no longer an issue of winning or losing; it's all down to whoever manages to survive this bloodbath.

That's just so sad... I can't accept it. Where's the salvation?

I charge all the way through the enemy army by myself. I should be happy, but I'm not. I'm angry. Really, *really* angry. I almost feel nauseous... and not because I'm hungry.

Kuroi turns around, and the battlefield fills my monitor.

The Einherjar's attacks are vicious. Maybe it's because it's dusk and the shadows are deeper, but the burning red from within their

black armor flickers brightly. Though they are silent, their emotions—their rage—comes through clearly.

The vampires, not to be outdone, unleash battle cries and fight back with a vengeance... but their inferiority is also clear. Stabbed by spears and slashed by swords, one by one they turn to ash. I catch the sight of one vampire grabbing hold of an Einherjar, only to be caught by its overflowing red flames, the enemy's hand turned to ash. It tries to struggle, but this only serves to turn the rest of its body into a pile of ashes.

Looks like there's no need for another charge. We can win; I can just watch the rest from here. Even so, it doesn't make me happy. I mean, this was supposed to be an incredibly difficult game. Who knows, maybe it's just one of those events. Maybe real war is like this, and the devs went all out on the high-quality realism. Perhaps I should be grateful.

Regardless, I don't like it. This isn't to my tastes; I don't accept it. Just because battle can't be avoided doesn't mean I want it to be crush or be crushed. I want a happy end; a cliched yet sweet finale. An ending that doesn't involve annihilating our enemies, but one where we all can live in prosperity. That's what I want.

Horrific scenes like this, where I can practically hear the Demon God cackling in the background... where everyone's efforts are not met with salvation... I want to smash them all!

Strength fills my hands. My mouse and keyboard are rattling. Maybe that's why Kuroi seems to move on her own. She fits her foot into the stirrup and stands in the saddle. I know she's tired—I can tell just from looking at her stamina gauge. What's she doing? She drops her swords and extends her arms to balance herself. Then, balling her hands into fists, she takes a deep breath.

“OHHHHHHHHHH!” she roars.

Huh? Why'd she do that? She's out of mana and stamina. Huh? Is this some kind of technique or spell? And how is she moving on her own? But this voice, this roar... I feel like I've heard it before. Once, long ago.

Kuroi's cry seems to be filled with rage towards the world.

O-Oh! The battle... stopped? Did my computer freeze? Looks like that's a no. Geez, don't scare me like that! Still, no one's moving. And judging from the smoke, the wind's died down as well. The world is completely silent.

The Einherjar are all lined up. They look so cool posing with their swords and spears, like statues. The vampires are either totally still, down on their knees, or sitting. None of them are holding weapons; I can't sense any bloodlust.

The battlefield... is no longer a battlefield. Does that mean it's

over?

Ha... Aha ha... Wow... Kuroi's amazing. She's so strong. Her voice reached the entire world. Not only that—the world listened. She scolded them, and they gave up.

Yeah, this is how it should be. Sira and the soldiers should be fine now, too. Since vampires and humans can speak the same language, we should be able to figure this out properly somewhere else. It'd be stupid if we couldn't. Our conversations, stories, legends, songs... everything that moves our hearts has a meaning to it.

Maybe this peace right now was brought about by force, but that's okay; it's still progress. One day, I'm sure we'll all be able to smile together.

Hm? What's with my monitor? I can't really see... Am I sleepy? I feel so sluggish. Like, I can't even keep sitting. Damn, this isn't just malnourishment, is it? Oh no, my vision's slowly getting narrower...

The pizza. I have to get to the pizza. I gotta eat. It's so cold.

Kuroi, make sure you eat too. Switching to observation mode. We... We still have lots more fighting to do...

-Origis I-

I look up at the slowly darkening sky from my saddle, as my horse trots quickly along. Will the fort still be recognizable when I get there? Will their army still be fighting? I bet General Bandkan will be leading them, and he's not the type to go down without a fight.

Did Lady Kuroi make it in time? Where is she now? Is she fighting? Five thousand of our Bomber Knights are riding hard to catch up, drawing a straight line to the battlefield; no scouts of any kind. None of our men have had any rest. Our horses drain dry every watering hole that we come across as we rush on. Even so, we haven't been able to catch up.

"What's the matter, Origis? Why the sigh?" Marius wants to know.

"Hm? Oh, I was just thinking that I couldn't be an outrider."

"That's... Hm... You have a point."

Marius's face is uncharacteristically gloomy. He's used to hard rides, so I doubt he's tired. The battle at the Hell Expanse must still be weighing on his mind, which is odd. To the outsider, he'd appear to have done very well, having captured the enemy general in an easy battle. However, humanity's current predicament stems from the fact that we weren't able to see the bigger picture. This isn't Marius's fault, and I'm sure he understands that, but the fact that the battle itself was a trap must be what hurts most.

"It's funny that we're actually taking an army from the Frontier to the fort. It's almost like the rumors were true," I chuckle.

“Oh, that stuff about the House Willow revolt? I suppose I heard something about that.”

“According to son Peine, the folks at the fort have been preparing for it.”

“Talk about overreacting. Then again, maybe not; Agias is popular.”

“Besides, General Bandkan is one of us.”

The rumor goes that Agias, driven to the Frontier after a dispute over succession, is planning a revolt with me and Marius in tow. It's not completely unreasonable, I suppose. My father's only concerns are of loyalty to the throne, and my brother Nazarus is completely covered in the rot that is noble society. Thus, it was always Agias who took charge of the Willow forces. Eventually, he was punished for hunting down monsters, which was seen as “misappropriating war funds.” Then, without resisting or talking to anyone, he left.

Some time later, out of the blue, he sent us a letter—the bastard was doing just fine. Honestly, I felt compelled to action at the time, that's why I brought Marius along with me.

“In retrospect, a revolt seems so carefree,” I remark.

“Heh heh. Those are the words of a big man. I remember when you called Agias a freak during our reunion.”

“What else could I have said? There was no way I could have known that that thing he was doing was training... It's amazing I didn't draw my sword right there. Besides, you fought alongside me.”

“I wanted to train with the both of you; the reason didn't matter.”

“No wonder you didn't stop me. Remind me to keep a closer eye on you.”

We both chuckle as our eyes wander ahead. Agias' gaze is locked on the south. He doesn't seem panicked in the least. We left the foot soldiers behind with Father Felipe, while the cavalry raced on ahead.

“You think there's enough time?” Whether Marius's question refers to us or Lady Kuroi, I cannot say.

What can we save if we get there in time, anyway? What will be lost if we don't make it? There's no room for error in this war. Agias's resoluteness is reassuring, at least.

“I'm sure Lady Kuroi will make it in time,” I assure, half praying. The situation seems too forlorn to do anything else. “Besides, she won't be outnumbered even if she's alone. She's a one-girl army, after all. If the fort still stands, she should be able to figure something out.”

“The times are in such chaos... but yeah, you might be right.”

“See?”

“But it's not like Lady Kuroi doesn't get tired, right?”

“Of course not, she just has more stamina than me or even Agias.”

“Right. She's got all that training on top of God's blessing.”

“Yeah, we’ve even been doing it at night around the fire lately...”

Good, Marius is back to normal. Some color’s even returned to his cheeks.

I gaze at the horizon far ahead. I have the feeling that death and farewell await us—a military man’s constant companions. No matter what I do, I just can’t shake off this premonition.

Agias barks some orders. We’re heading to the next watering hole. Nice, let’s ride so I can stop thinking. Let’s ride as far as we can, towards the horizon.

60 The Knight Plans and Hopes for the Glory of Humanity

God's power is overwhelming. It's hot, fierce, and unrelenting. Thus, it is difficult to feel like one has control. It can even make you feel sick.

-Knight Agias II-

The underground chamber, lit by torches, is colored a bright orange. It's like an unending sunset. The ground beneath me is rough with a mixture of ash and charcoal bits. Oil and bestial smells linger in the foul air. The source of this stench is the fuel prepared to light this place on fire in case of an emergency—along with the prisoners we captured that meant we needn't go that far. The clicking of boots echo in the chamber, covering up the sounds of moaning and dragging. I wait as they slowly come into view.

"Oh, if it isn't Lord Willow. Imagine my surprise to see you here."

"Pardon the late-night intrusion."

The figure of a man with a lantern appears, a family crest adorning his sword belt. It might seem strange to charge a high-ranking officer with an underground jail's security, but considering the unordinary prisoners we find ourselves with, it actually seems appropriate.

Four hundred sixty-eight vampires surrendered to us, and now fill our dungeon. Which is funny, considering they could turn this fort into gravel in a single night if they wanted to.

"How are the prisoners?" I ask.

"They're quiet. That black rope proved very effective."

"I see. It's soaked with ignition fluid, so..."

"I understand. Please leave it to me."

I was going to warn him to be careful, but I'm struck silent. Ultimately, I leave the decision up to him. Essentially, if they show signs of resistance that he can't handle, he's to burn all the prisoners. If necessary, he's also to close the iron doors, the only exit, and burn the entire dungeon down. It's an important yet difficult job. Even if they are vampires, burning prisoners alive is a cruel thing to do. The fact that they're vampires also brings with it a fair amount of danger. I hear this officer's already written his will. I wonder if he'll have the

guts to lock the door when the time comes.

“It’s a great burden I’ve placed upon you,” I say apologetically.

“Please, I volunteered for this. General Bandkan himself taught me all the tricks of this fort. This is my job as his survivor.”

This man is a seasoned veteran. I heard he and his cavalry unit fought against fifty vampires. Normally, I would rather he take over General Bandkan’s place as head of the fort’s army.

“Ha ha ha, be at ease. Sira taught me the words for Ignite. Would you like me to demonstrate by turning your staff into charcoal?” he jokes.

This man has lost a lot, that’s for sure. His superiors, his friends, his steed... and his right leg. He’ll never ride into battle as a knight again. That’s why he bequeathed control of the fort’s army to me. I sense rage in him, as well as shame. War is endlessly cruel.

“Our main force will arrive tomorrow—four thousand five hundred spears and familiars led by Father Felipo.”

“Ah, finally. This land will become humanity’s last bastion, then.”

He’s right, of course. We had no choice but to leave the defense of the north to the elves, and the state of affairs to the south is looking grimmer by the hour. Towns and villages are falling left and right.

The palace has been taken, as well. I’m told they offered no resistance due to some internal squabble. The messenger who told me this almost killed himself from shame. Through gritted teeth, he informed me of the citizens’ armed uprising that occurred before the five thousand vampires lead by Crumbling Mountain could even reach them.

The uprising was incited by the Starlight Band, a group of vampire sympathizers. Many of their members were knights and nobles, apparently. Perhaps they thought it was their best chance to overthrow the royals, whom they considered elf-loving traitors. At present, the royal family’s safety is unknown. It’s not even clear if the royal knights were able to intervene, let alone how the citizens are doing. The only thing we know for sure is that the Church was burned down.

Things are as close to bad as they can get. Humanity has been chased onto death’s door, and is now facing extinction, which means we now require a certain something.

“I was thinking of introducing you to the sorcerer when he arrives.”

“That’s the man who brought back the ways of fire magic, yes?”

“That’s right, Odysson leads the Mage Company, but magic itself is not a military discipline. It would be quite reassuring if we could have someone to advise them in that regard.”

“...You wish me to stand on the battlefield again? Me?”

That gaze; that light deep within his eyes... it burns like a pyre.

That's fighting spirit; *that's* what we need. In times of crisis, we must rally to our indomitable fighting spirit. The guts to be proud and human will be our final, greatest weapon.

"I would. So please, take care of your health."

"Ha ha... Ha ha ha! I see. I can still fight, huh?"

Good, now he should refrain from attempting to punish himself. Perhaps he'll also regain the strength to fight against destiny. A presence like his will most assuredly give courage to the fort's army, now that they've lost General Bandkan.

Sigh... I've become so conniving. I feed the broken-hearted sweet words and send them to their graves; prod the pride of the broken-bodied and send them to their demise. My plan is to turn desperation into fighting power. This is the true reality of a commander: staying safe while sending soldiers to die and kill your enemies. I will cross as many lines as I have to right now. One day, I will be judged. One day, I will die.

I leave the dungeon and look up at the night sky. It looks like mud. Rain is coming.

People cannot bring about great things by maintaining their integrity... Hm! I never accepted Nazarus's dirty dealings back then. I considered his excessive flattery of the royalty, boot-licking of other military families, and blackmail of great merchant families to be depravity of the highest order for one of his pedigree. Meanwhile, I tried to take the high road, and our paths ended up splitting.

I had to squash my pride in order to send that letter... which brought Origis and Marius to me. They were sent by Father and Nazarus, I suspect. Otherwise, they'd never have come with a thousand elite cavalry in tow. Our men aren't so lacking in discipline that they'd so easily defect like that. Not to mention the extra soldiers, equipment, horses, and supplies they sent to the Frontier... How much money and manpower did that require? What made it all possible? Who's supporting the soldiers' families? The answer is obvious.

On the cusp of our nation's fall, my father and brother have decided to take action.

Even now, having returned to the fort, I haven't heard word of the Willow army's whereabouts. The estate might not lie along the vampires' path, but there's no way they'd simply sit and wait for destruction. They're somewhere out there, doing only God knows what.

"Oh, here comes Agias."

"Indeed. Good timing, brother."

Origis and Marius, eh? They seem to be drawing something on the ground with sticks... Battle formations? Well, well. The center column

of soldiers is taking the brunt of the enemy's attack, luring them into being completely surrounded. The light of the lanterns brings to life the battle that took place at this very fort not too long ago.

"Oh, curious about this? I'm acting as the vampires, and Marius as the fort army. I lost. There's no way to break this strategy."

"It's amazing. No matter how few or many vampires we face, this strategy can handle them all."

"And that's not all. If we employ our Bomber Knights and fireproof soldiers, we can create a net of pure death."

"Origis can even sweep through the center of the enemy's forces with the fire wheel formation."

"Hey, are you trying to get me killed, too? I could accidentally be crushed by all those bodies."

As usual, they get along well. They're also both quite clever. In the center of the foot soldiers, they've drawn an emblem. In other words, that's where the commander sits. I don't sigh, but I can't hide my grief.

"This is General Bandkan's strategy," I remind myself.

He was a great military man. He never let the rot of the palace affect him, nor fell victim to scornful independence; he even supported the entire Frontier with the strength of his forces. He was a pillar of the nation, connecting the north and the south.

A chill creeps up my back. I've lost a master, at a time when I truly wish I could rely upon him.

"You can do it, can't you, Agias?" His words irk me; they're stupid and imprudent. That's not like Origis.

"...Easier said than done," I object.

"No, you can. You *have* to."

Something in his voice makes me look at him. He fixes me with his gaze. It burns with spirit... and that's not all: his fire is radiating towards me.

He resumes, his eyes piercing me: "We'll march on the palace. The king's power is broken, and the vampires rule now. We *have* to win; that much is obvious. But that can't be all we do—we have to give the citizens a sign in their time of fear and despair." He's practically breathing fire now. His fists are clenched. "Strength—the strength of humans. We are weak, hunted for food by monsters and other races, pathetic, and sad... everyone's scared. Even so, if you want to have pride despite it all, you have to grit your teeth and pick up a sword. That's a warrior, right?"

His spirit is so bright I can hardly look at him. My cheeks are warm, yet he doesn't stop there:

"Moreover, we are Willow men—descendants of a famous military family; we have to be stronger than all others. Plus, you have your

position as commander of our army, Agias. You have to be stronger than anyone... a hero of humanity."

Marius nods as well. Is this the conclusion you two have come to? A hero... A hero of humanity. You wish me, one who only knows how to fight, to sit at the head of humanity despite all of my flaws and imperfections?

"Lady Kuroi is strong. She exists in a realm no one can reach." Marius flashes a smile, like a faint and beautiful flower, just as our mother used to. "However, strength isn't her true nature, in my opinion. None of us wants to be like her. We pray to her. Through her, we hope to speak to God, asking for His blessing, in order to grant this world a miracle." He puts a hand to his chest, as if praying. "Lady Kuroi is hope in human form... the first and last miracle gifted to humanity. Of that, I'm sure."

Ah, now I see exactly what they're getting at. They want me to become the core around which humanity's fighting spirit gathers... The first person to fight with hope in their heart. To be the one to raise the "banner" of Lady Kuroi.

"Lady Kuroi seems to be doing well, I might add. I saw her down five bowls of soup not too long ago," casually comments Marius.

"Fool! Why didn't you tell me that earlier?!" I scold him.

"Why? She seemed fine, even while asleep."

"She said some funny things in her sleep, like 'pizza' and 'DDR,'" I counter.

"But..."

"Agias, you get pretty creepy when it comes to Lady Kuroi's health," says Origis.

"Huh?"

"Like you're caring for a daughter or something... You've become a doting grandfather."

"Aha ha, totally!"

"What?!"

I don't understand. They extol me as humanity's hero one minute, then call me a grandfather the next.

That indescribable chill in my chest is gone, now replaced by hardened resolve. I can feel how hot my spirit burns.

I turn my gaze to the south, taking in the fields that were a battlefield not too long ago. We march... for the palace. With hope's army at my back, I shall lead.

61 The Sorcerer Dines and Makes Up His Mind, Eyes Focused on the Aftermath of the Great War

No power is limitless. No power is without cost.

God's assistance requires support, and not just in the form of prayers...

-Sorcerer Odysson I-

This may very well be my last meal. It's not some lavish banquet, but the assortment of wine, meat, and soup set up in the meeting room is impressive considering we're on the eve of battle.

"Hark, all those who gather in the lone fortress under the wavering banner of flame!"

Damn black-hearted priest. His meaty cheeks are twisted in a grin.

"Tomorrow, we march! Some of you might not make it back! Perhaps none of us will! But I see no sorrowful shadows upon the faces surrounding this table tonight! No traces of fear at all! We are the executors of heaven's will for revolution! Despair is our true enemy!"

His eyes are burning; his fists are balled so tightly that they're shaking. What's gotten into him? This is weird, even for him. He's like a child having a tantrum.

"Dissenters! They call us dissenters! How dare they? Yesterday, our protective mountain range was breached, our heroic soldiers killed, and our innocent citizens slaughtered and eaten! On this eve of destruction, humanity's future is uncertain! Filth! Filth! Such sentiment, deserving of scorn, has finally become a poisonous curse!"

Damn it, son Peine, don't offer me food right now. Your best friend is screaming at the top of his lungs. Ooh, are those thinly sliced fried potatoes? I'll have some of that.

A-Ahem. Right. Eat, rest, fight. There's no longer any need for reason; no time to hesitate. In order to survive, we must win.

"Upon examination of the letter's imperial seal, I discovered it has only the mark of the king's younger sister, Inkja! It's true! For you see, the king and the prince are missing!" declares the priest.

I suppose the king would have a sister or two. His family is huge,

after all. Not that I care. All these hoity-toity letters make our rebellion seem more official.

“The king’s sister is inhuman,” says Ange. Whoa, lady. What a thing to call someone. The disgust in her eyes is palpable. “Even among those rotten nobles, she’s something else. You’ve heard the rumors, haven’t you? That they mass-sacrificed virgins to the Demon God. They even stole children from various towns in order to satisfy their crazed cult... like my daughter.”

Whoa, whoa! What the hell? Even son Peine’s stopped eating. Although not everyone has. Impressive. Well, one of them’s a rabbit; the black and white one. It’s sitting on Sira’s lap and munching on veggies, its horn adorned in a leather decoration like the sheath for a sword. The other one... Yeah, I’ll pretend I didn’t see that; she’s special. Trying to stop her would bring about divine punishment, I’d bet. Her slurping is so loud, though.

Sira seems concerned; she reaches out a hand to the Crimson lady. She’s a nice girl.

“I think we’ve all heard similar stories. The king’s sister I know is a beast and a drug addict.”

Wow, Father. Did something finally snap? Talking badly about the royal family makes us seem a lot like a rebellion group, but that’s not it. The ‘revolution’ you’re talking about isn’t some petty human-on-human squabble. What you’re planning is an inferno that will engulf the continent, it’s species... and even the gods.

“Lady Ange, I have no words to describe the atrocities that my family has committed. If it is a blood grudge you carry, then I invite you to kill me when everything is over,” confesses the priest.

Wait... Whoa, whoa, whoa! Does that mean he’s...?

“Who the hell are you?” Ange asks.

“I am this country’s seventh prince. My official name is Felipe Valkie Millennium. My father is the king, the crown prince my brother, and the king’s sister my aunt.”

He’s a damn prince?! Did son Peine know this? Judging from the way he continues to eat, he must have. The knight and his brothers are surprised; you can really see the family resemblance in their similar expressions. I wonder if the king also has a black heart he wears on his sleeve. It’s not the time for it, but I can’t help smiling a bit. Oh, someone smiled before me... the Crimson lady. She’s holding Sira’s hand.

“You’re a prince? Don’t make me laugh, you muddy, sweaty pig.” Stop it, son Peine! This isn’t the time to be laughing your ass off... probably. “Don’t get the wrong idea. You’re a priest—one who’s gotten down in the dirt of the Frontier, bloodied his hands in battle against monsters, and yet still talks of grand aspirations like

‘revolution.’ We might get a little emotional about our families, you and I, but we’re kindred.”

Ah, I see. The fall of the palace, the nation’s fate, the king’s sister’s rise to power... They all seem fictitious to me, but for the black-hearted priest, they’re very real. I can’t let my emotions show; this isn’t someone else’s problem anymore.

“And? What do you plan to do, Felipo?” son Peine pipes up. Of course, only after all the fried potatoes are gone. The bastard. “Surely you don’t intend to blather on about succession, do you? Your right to the throne does exist, but it is still extremely small; no one cares about that. Now, tell us the rest. What have you analyzed, and how do you propose we proceed?”

He sure seems like he’s having fun. His fingers and lips are shining with oil, but he almost seems like he’s wielding a sword or a spear; it’s like he’s begging for the order to charge. Right, he was always the one who craved battle the most out of all of us. Funny, considering he’s such a schemer.

“Frankly speaking, my aunt is the vampire’s puppet,” the priest acknowledges. Figures. Like, what else could be going on? “The letter was likely produced by a key member of the Starlight Band and a vampire vassal as a means to provoke and lure us in. Perhaps they wish to limit our battlefields now that we no longer have to worry about the fort falling.”

“Seems plausible, but there’s not much point to that. Wouldn’t we logically go to the palace upon hearing it’s been taken?”

“Then maybe it’s a demonstration?” the youngest Willow presents his take. He’s got a cute face, but he’s crazy, too. “A way to dampen our morale, or obstruct the populace’s faith in us. Perhaps they wish to draw us into the fort.”

“Well, our soldiers’ morale aside, the citizens are certainly worried. If we were to deal with all of them, it would severely hamper our marching speed,” argues son Peine.

“Oh-hoh! I assume your suggestions stem from your experiences in the Hell Expanse?”

Uh, what’s he talking about? I can’t keep up.

“That’s so... human.” Human? Who is? The yellow-eyes? “Think about their actions since the declaration of war: testing the waters in the west, the extended battle in the Hell Expanse, the massive trap they laid by executing a pincer strike on the Frontier, the extreme offensive they led on the palace... they were all highly polished operations.”

And not at all like the vampires, son Peine concludes, and pops a boiled bean into his mouth. Then, he continues:

“If Lady Kuroi was their only objective, then a threat, not a letter

demanding answers, would be a better option. They could torture the citizens of the palace to summon her out. Or, even better for them, destroy the palace like they did the mountain and assault the fort with brute force. That would be much more vampire-like.”

He has a point. The yellow-eyes are monsters that delight in violence. Even Golden’s assault was sloppy and without strategy—forced and purely for fun.

“I see. So you’re saying that their use of the royal family’s authority is itself unnatural?” asks Marius.

“Unless I’m missing something and the king’s sister is some great figure to them, then yes.”

“Therefore, it is unnatural. This letter... Considering the timing and method employed... Yes, yes. Cunning and malice alone wouldn’t explain this.”

“Maybe they’re just having fun pitting us humans against each other?” Ange suggests.

“If that were the case, they would not grant us a chance to explain or withdraw.” The youngest brother sure has a disturbingly cold smile; even Origis is taken aback. “They’d send the royal knights without a second thought; my family’s army, too. A Willow-on-Willow battle would be the most likely outcome.”

“Marius, what are you saying?” Origis questions, surprised.

“Haven’t you considered the possibility, Origis? We haven’t heard a peep about their movements, yet Father and Nazarus aren’t the types to just sit idly by in this sort of situation.”

Family issues, huh? I guess famous families have their own share of problems. Agias’s arms are crossed, and he hasn’t budged, though.

“Whoa, now, Marius! That’s important information. Isn’t it, Felipo?”

“Yes, it is. The full scope of the vampires’ half-baked plans is coming into view.”

“And what do you surmise from this unrefined strategy?”

“That some sort of problem must have occurred.”

The black-hearted priest attacks some smoked fish with renewed appetite. As for son Peine, he changes his target to the omelet. They both look delicious.

“If they were trying to use human authority to their advantage, then they wouldn’t miss the fact that most of our main force is made up of Willow soldiers. But if they can’t discern that, then what does that mean? Son Peine?”

“That the army of House Willow is on the move, away from the palace.”

“And speaking of authority, religion would be the greatest form of this. Don’t you find it strange that they don’t make any reference to

the existence of our God?"

"Felipo, I'd say that the fact that the Church was burned to the ground is the stranger bit. Fire is the human element. If they wished to extol their own god, then surely there was a better way to destroy it. Perhaps one that involved lightning or earth."

"Truly, truly. And this doesn't even touch on the fact that the cunning Archbishop would never just roll over and die."

"I suppose some people truly don't die when they are killed. They have a... lust for life."

"Do you speak of yourself now, Undead son Peine?"

Uh, what? Why are they so chipper? Even I am reaching for some meat now. Oh, that's some good stuff. Some wine would go well with this.

"So the vampires' plan is to make themselves appear greater than they are, then?" Agias, our army's commander, asks for clarification. The black-hearted priest, son Peine, and Marius all nod. Ange follows, and I bring up the rear. Origis agrees with his eyes. Sira is petting her rabbit... and the raven-haired girl is too focused on feasting to have heard anything, I bet.

"Excuse me. I have an urgent message."

Oh, Captain Zakkow! So he was on guard duty, huh?

"The vampires at the palace have split their forces. A thousand are headed northeast."

There are currently five thousand vampires in the capital, and they just sent out a thousand? That's a large force. What's in the northeast, anyway?

"House Willow's estate lies to the northeast of the palace," adds Agias. Wait, what? "Our family must have inspired this march. It is also the ultimate proof that this letter was a bluff. In other words, a crack has appeared in their state of affairs. Swiftiness is of utmost importance now. Tomorrow morning, our entire army shall march on the capital."

"Wait, wait, wait!" I stopped them. Er, put a pin in it, anyway. "What about reinforcements? Aren't you going to send some? That's a thousand vampires, you know? Sure, we can use fire magic, but God's blessing has yet to propagate south of the fort."

"If they required reinforcements, they would say so. From our location, the road to the Willow Estate is also a treacherous one. If we send troops that way, it will be difficult for them to meet up with us at the palace."

"But that doesn't mean..."

"House Willow has a duty to execute and dignity to maintain. I also..."

His blazing eyes land on Kuroi. She's holding a bowl of soup. Man,

she just doesn't stop eating. How many bowls is that? I heard she made a crazy dash from the Hell Expanse, and that once the battle was over she collapsed. I guess this is for the best, then. Eat while you can, you know? But, like... at least look at us a bit. And drink some water!

"...would like to bring the Apostle to the palace," Agias continues. "The purpose of this move is to instill some hope into humanity."

God damn natural-born military men. So manly, always ready to go into battle. Such majestic guts... unlike me.

"We must go straight down the path of righteousness, so that any and all may follow after us," he declares.

He's marching for something big... perhaps even marching to his death. I can see it on his face, the bastard. But I won't let that happen. I doubt everyone here will survive; war is not that kind. However... there are some of us who *absolutely* must survive. And I will do all I can to make sure they do, so that we can taste true victory. I *won't* let them die.

62 DDR Nutrition and Reality

I feel a connection with God—a strong, deep connection.

May our prayers reach Him. May the Devil God descend upon this war-torn world.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 10-

Rice crackers, bread, ham, apples, peanuts, fish cake, chocolate, beef jerky... plus some vegetable juice and canned coffee. I'm all set! Good to go! Even while gaming at home, sometimes I forget my nutrition. Hey guys, it's PotatoStarch!

Man, I thought I was gonna die. Passing out isn't like going to sleep—the chills and unpleasantness aren't to be underestimated. Now, this pizza is freaking delicious, even if it's dry as hell. Is it healthy or unhealthy that I collapse from a little bit of starvation but bounce right back up after a bite of pizza?

And then there's Kuroi's feast for the ages going on over here.

"Kuroi, are you gonna keep eating forever? I haven't seen you stop yet," Ange wants to know. She was eating at the fort. She's eating on the move. She eats during training. She even eats while setting up camp. "You really like potatoes, huh? Wait, that's not even cooked! Does that taste good?"

"Mm."

What an appetite. She's like a saiyan, or a certain third generation of master thief. No, girl monster hunter would make more sense. That's a different game, though.

"Make sure to chew, at least. And drink some water."

"Mm."

I'm surprised she can even chew on horseback. Aha ha, now Sira's trying to copy her! Man, I feel full just watching her. It gives me a little energy, too. To live is to eat! Man, I love fishcake.

That reminds me, when I went to the convenience store earlier, I thought: "Ha! What was I worried about at home? I'm such a scaredy-cat!" Sure, my phone and email are dead. Someone is probably monitoring me, too. But outside my room, the town is peaceful. The infrastructure is sound, order is secure, and the days are calm; there's no room for horror or suspense themes. This is Japan, after all, home of prosperity, peace, and happiness. We even managed to remain unharmed during the America-China War, which most consider to be World War III, despite being positioned directly between both countries. We had a front-row view of America's overwhelming victory, and we didn't even flinch.

And here I am, in such a blessed land, not going to work... I would if I could, to be honest. All I'm doing is playing video games from sunup to sunset. What do I have to be afraid of? I'm not going to die; no one's out to murder me. I have no struggles. My life's not even comparable to the ones inside my monitor.

“Potatoes, eh? An excellent taste. I’ll boil a whole bunch of them during our next break. It’s just like setting up a bath. Oh! Look that way, Lady Kuroi.” Beyond the rows of cavalry and foot soldiers is a group of people, not blocking our progress but still unmissable. “They’re citizens that were forced to evacuate their once-peaceful homes.”

An old man in a tattered cloak; an old lady with a cloth over her head; a man pulling his belongings on a large two-wheeled wagon; a woman carrying a baby; a pregnant woman thickly clad in clothes; injured men, carried on the backs of others; muddy children holding their siblings’ hands.

“As you can see, it’s not just one or two places that have been affected. They must have come from the west. The vampires really had their way with them...”

Tens, no, hundreds of people, young and old, male and female, with only the clothes on their backs. I’ve seen and experienced this before; this is the look of people who have been through a disaster. They’ve lost their normal lives, but their expressions say they’re still fighting to survive. DDR gets too real with its details sometimes, man.

“Lord Willow and I shall go speak with them. Lady Ange, please prepare some supplies to share. Son Peine, prepare a guard force from our foot soldiers. Odysson, give them a little show,” orders the fat priest.

“And me? What can I do?” Sira pipes up.

“Go get the rabbits, then. Make sure they’re exquisitely fluffy.”

The hot knight and black-hearted priest head out towards them. Y’know, this event seems like it’s calling to me. See? It’s my time to shine. I don’t even have to get off my horse and a group comes, surrounding me and offering prayers.

“G-Great Apostle, please accept our humble gift. It is our best product.”

“Mm.”

“Oh! Why, she’s eating it raw! Such a blessing!”

Hm, the Devil God’s faith points are shooting up. *Up, up, up!* Our limited provisions are going down, down, down, though. The biggest requirement in a relief operation is, of course, food. I see some people handing out blankets, too.

And so, led by a group of ten soldiers, the evacuees head north—probably to the fort. We have a lot of food there. I hear there’s even more food stored in the mountains.

How many more similar events will we go through before arriving at the palace? Lots of in-game time has passed since we left the fort. We’ve been charting a direct path, but even so we haven’t even made it halfway yet. Unlike last time, we’re not making a superhuman drive.

Instead, we're going at a steady pace with plenty of breaks each day.

Huh, my system seems to be performing well today. Time to turn on high-speed mode. If I don't actively use it, I could spend untold hours on marching. This isn't a game about traveling, man.

Mmh, that vegetable juice hit the spot. Maybe I'll check the news for a change of pace. Whoa, another bad day for planet Earth. Terrorism, refugees, poverty, starvation, civil war, environmental destruction, a financial crisis... and that atomic submarine is still missing. As usual, the headlines are dominated by American stories. Isn't that weird? Why are all the top stories on an international news site from the same country?

Every now and again, I'm reminded of how odd the internet is. Every bit of information is at our fingertips, so why doesn't any of it feel real? The super AI's perfect service has really made so much of our modern lives more convenient. I like to believe that I think and care about international affairs, but nothing moves my heart. Honestly, DDR seems way more realistic... Oh, dear. My system's acting weird again. Time to switch to observation mode. We've got a lot of marching left to do.

Huh, another event. The rows of soldiers part to make way for a man in ancient armor. He looks very heroic.

"Hare of Flame, I thank thee for granting me this audience. I am Donte, a warrior from Green Hills. My fellow warriors and I come bringing every vassal available to us. We ask that you allow us the honor of fighting at the very edge of your great army, O Great Savior."

The man kneels and offers up his equally ancient sword. It's nicely polished, but contains no special qualities or bonuses to speak of. Hm, the item description says it's a family heirloom. Kuroi, still on horseback, takes the sword and strokes it—it disappears. Gone to her vault, I guess. So she can increase her stores that way, huh?

"Ohh... That the pride of my house would be welcomed as God's strength... Ohh...!"

The man backs up, and my army's numbers increase by thirty cavalry and a hundred and fifty soldiers. How many events like this have I seen? I'm gaining more soldiers this way than I'm losing them to refugee assistance, so my army is steadily increasing. Its numbers doubled from ten to twenty thousand strong. Total faith points are also still rising.

See? Here come some more. This time they're waving a very colorful banner from a different area. Their army seems to be made up of half soldiers, half support units. Today I learned that units carrying supplies are very rare.

Strategy gamers will insist that war is all about numbers and supplies. War, huh? The casualties they read out on the news always

felt like they were nothing special, like the traffic accident report bulletin at the local police station. Although, of course, it is a bit humbling to see. In contrast, this is... There are no unnamed characters in DDR, and the game is high quality, so their deaths are more shocking. I remember every enemy and ally's face. There's no way to redo things, either.

I'm also pretty attached to this playthrough. It's so nice to see Kuroi leading all these familiar faces that she met at the Frontier; they're all working so hard. There's the soldiers that have followed me since the beginning; the ones that joined us at the fort; and the various groups that joined us in our march towards the palace. You can feel how unique all of them are. I even wish that there were no battle events in this game. Maybe they should make it more suitable for a younger audience and go with sports duels or something instead? Then I could still play as Kuroi, and no one would have to die. It's a game. Just a game. So why is my heart pounding so hard?

Hm? My intercom just rang. Who could that be? ...Yes, I'll be right there. Sigh, a delivery?

Uh, what the hell is this?! Hello?! Something crazy just happened. It's honestly mindblowing, but as a gamer I'm overjoyed. I'm so excited! A VR machine just got sent to me! Then again, I am a gamer, so I already have one... However, this thing's got way better specs. It's the latest and greatest model, with the price tag of an import luxury car. I've seen one at work, so I'm sure I'm not mistaken, but... Wow, I'm even afraid to take off the plastic.

So... what does this mean? Was it Santa Claus? Although, to be honest, I don't really need this at the moment. I'm exclusively focused on DDR, after all. VR isn't suitable for long play sessions, either.

Oh! There's also a message card. What's it say... Oh, God, not this again. And since it's physical, this time I can't copy and paste it into a translation site. Come on, these weird Romanian letters don't show up when I type normally on my keyboard!

63 Bewilderment at the Pentagon / The Acolyte Leaves, Shouldering Hope

As I get closer to the palace, God's presence gets stronger.

Is this because of humanity's prayers? Or is it because our enemy is fierce?

-****, the Dragon God II-

The smell of dust and silicone oil. Ozone stings at the back of my nose, eating away at it.

Why does the air in the strategy room corner a person so much? The only source of color in the middle of this bland tranquility is a print out of the elven flag, the Ewlogond Republic's banner. It's white, to represent air; and blue, to represent water. It reminds me of the sky.

I pour a cup of water from the pitcher. It's clear and dull. I take a sip, merely to maintain my water intake, and it stings my parched throat... Whoa! Shoot! It tips, but by some miracle of centrifugal force or surface tension, I manage not to spill any. I almost ruined our electronics. If our mission failed because of me spilling some water, I'd never be able to live it down.

Phew... Gotta focus. On the monitor is a view of the parallel world. The flow of time there is uncertain. The scene on display is the continent's central field. It's like viewing the hustle and bustle of the street from a high rise; I cannot smell even the slightest stench from the elven army. They're so far away, they almost look like a pattern.

Damn the Air Force. How am I supposed to learn anything from this high up? The readings on the submonitor tell me way more. The super AI is quite competent.

The situation seems decent; our battle lines are stable. It's not a bad idea to simply wait out the vampires' aggression like this. Their attacks used to be so fierce that we'd been forced into continuous battles day and night, but recently they've been quite passive. It's a sign that, despite their numbers, their morale is dwindling. Now, if only a storm would bring some heavy wind and rain, we could wipe them out... No, it's dangerous to leave things to chance.

Imagine the worst-case scenario. Prepare yourself to make the best choices against the strongest opponent. They could be waiting until

the time is ripe to unleash a second offensive. Absolute did say to be extremely careful. Overconfidence is our greatest enemy; we must be completely prepared at all times. If the situation is unnatural, that should set off alarm bells.

Besides, an extended battle is not even possible. The vampires' creed is to be extremely aggressive in battle. However, losing Golden could have caused them to switch to some clever scheme in order to recover. That was the main thing we agreed to be on guard for during the strategy meeting.

In other words, a side attack from the southern corner of the battlefield will be the key to their second strike. This is unconfirmed, but I suspect it will be the force of thirty thousand led by Thunderstorm. If this is true, then Ten Thousand Bells' defensive properties combined with Deep Sea's suppression abilities should allow us to defeat Thunderstorm with relative efficiency. Once that's done, the balance of power should tip greatly in our favor; we will be able to invade the vampire lands with impunity.

Right now, the problem is the information I've received concerning the subhuman lands. I shouldn't bother myself with things that are happening on the fringes of this war, but I can't get over how strange this is. Apparently, Crumbling Mountain invaded them from the southwest and marched on the subhuman capital. The vampires might be sturdy marchers, but it's still a crazy ask. Even the elves, with their flying units, would have a difficult time breaching that mountain range.

And then there's the news that a unique unit might have spawned amidst the subhumans... With the power of fire, of all things. This *cannot* be allowed. Someone calling themselves the Devil God went through the crazy trouble of interfering in a parallel world in order to gain this power... this is truly the work of evil. Of all the things that no one must not be allowed to possess, the power of fire is top on the list.

Fire—in many mythologies, it's the beginning of culture. A great, holy power. It's even at the base of our culture, in various forms. The evil power of lightning was controlled by the vampires, and yet somehow we managed to gain control of the power of water, but already an unprecedented great sin begins to move. The world is in danger.

If the subhumans have the power of fire... they would be capable of violence on the scale of the nuclearized Asian countries. If it's true, we must seize it at once before the vampires get their hands on it.

Yes. Yes, that's how it *should* be. It will be easy to wipe out the subhumans, and with the power of fire, the elves will be able to smoothly take over the vampire territory. A good strategy, if I do say

so myself. It seems roundabout, but it's extremely efficient. I'll bring it up right away at the next meeting.

Gotta note this down on my phone... Hm? A message? What could it be? I'm busy communicating with the parallel world; the slightest disturbance could invite an irreversible disaster.

The sender is that Air Force first lieutenant. For a cyber officer, he sure lacks common sense...

Wh-what?! It's possible the subhuman god is a Japanese citizen?! What... What the hell?!

-Acolyte Hikurina I-

"Is everything ready, Acolyte Hikurina?"

"Yes..."

"Oh, you don't look so good. Unfortunately, we have no choice but to put this burden on you."

When I think of what that burden is, I can hardly look them in the face. It takes everything I have to respond. Before me is a carriage drawn by four horses. It's been given every sort of reinforcement possible, and looks like a sort of portable fort. The wheels are specially made, as well. A separate carriage was prepared just to carry the spares.

"You will have a mix of cavalry and foot soldiers as your guard. I realize it is meager considering the importance of your mission, but you'll have to make do." He sighs, grumbling about having to give away too many soldiers in order to evacuate the estate. What am I supposed to say to that?

Lord Nazarus, heir to House Willow. Over his armor he wears a white robe, and on his sword belt is inscribed his last will. His neck is covered in pure white powder, while his lips are colored a light crimson... he's dressed like he'll never come back alive. His smart looks add a cold sharpness to his fighting spirit.

"The road north is rough, but you should pass the worst of it after ten days. At that point, you shouldn't have to worry about anyone following you. The only thing left will be to be utterly certain you don't lose your cargo. If your horses die, carry it by hand. It'll be like you're parading around an enshrined deity."

What's that smile for? Why does he grin? And so cheerfully, too. He's protected us this far on our way to the fort, but now he's turning back towards the palace, isn't he? To rendezvous with his father, the head of House Willow, and their army... to intercept the vampires.

Nevertheless, the plan was never to win, was it? Only to tie. Their army is a motley crew of older officers, warriors who desire vengeance, knights wishing to clear their besmirched names, death-

crazed mercenaries, wounded soldiers who can't survive a long journey, sinners, and broke adventurers. They mean to use the estate as bait, so they can eliminate the incoming vampire army. They'll light it all ablaze, I'm certain. The fifty cavalry going with Nazarus are dressed just like him: for battle and death. Their empty eyes silently reflect the state of the world.

"Heh... Don't look so distressed. It would not be good for my honor to make a beautiful woman cry."

"I-I...!"

"I've reveled in sin for long enough. I've done things unworthy of my house, from dawn till dusk, and covered myself in the mud of human desire. Even so, I was at least decent in my treatment of women and children. Can't bring shame to my mother, can I?"

So he wants me to stop crying? What a selfish request. This man and his compatriots no longer look towards the future. They gaze at the past, and are satisfied. They've accepted their deaths. Putting on airs, I call it, to die bravely and with a smile. Exactly what sort of expression am I supposed to make when I watch them throw their lives away, then?

"Reinforcements! Request reinforcements from the Apostle's army! If you send your swiftest messenger now, surely... Perhaps not the Apostle herself, but some of her warriors that are capable of their new fire magic spells..."

"Don't make me laugh. It would be strategic folly to split up one's main army for a simple diversion. There is also your cargo to consider. It would be the height of stupidity to move the final battlefield or, heaven forbid, split it."

"Even so! Even if it is foolish! It could save lives!"

"This way will save the most lives. Think of those who are yet to be born. Sacrifice a few to save the whole."

"No... There must be another way!"

"Listen to me: this diversion also serves the purpose of purging the chains and rot of the previous generation. The king's sister's crazed actions have forced our hand."

"But why? Why... Huh?"

Is he... stroking my head?

"It is a difficult thing, I'm sure, to be a warrior of the Church. One must be gentle, yet strong... forced to cry many more times than allowed to smile."

He's so cruel. He's smiling again, isn't he? Quietly and peacefully, though he goes to his death.

"You're kind too," I say.

"No, I'm not. I've pushed the burden of surviving at all costs onto my brothers, for their deaths would mean the end of everything. They

will probably hate me for being so unreasonable.”

“I doubt your brothers will accept this.”

“Agias will. He’s a natural military man; he will see no other way. Origis will make a fuss, I’m sure, but Marius will be there to calm him down. He takes after our mother, that one.”

It’s no use. No matter what I say, I can’t reach his heart, I can’t stop their battle. The tears come, one after another with no end in sight. I do, however, manage to at least keep from sobbing.

“Acolyte Hikurina, don’t be mistaken. It is you all who are the unfortunate ones.”

Unfortunate. Life, death—this world is filled with misfortune. One can grit their teeth and work desperately, only to see those most precious to them die the next minute. Such is the world we live in.

“Yes, the palace will most likely burn. Me, my father, the archbishop, even the king—we will all turn to ash, no exceptions. But there is a seed of hope—the nation’s demise will be a pillow that provides the most tranquil sleep.” His eyes close slightly as he looks somewhere far away. Sighing deeply, his next words spill out. “There can be no greater end for the exhausted than this.”

He’s lying. It’s logic, nothing more. I can tell that his thoughts are turned towards someone else right now. I’ve seen this so much in my service to the Church; the face of someone thinking of one they hold dear is really something special. It’s sincere, honest, and true.

His position prevents him from crying; he has had to resign himself many times. And so, solemnly he sacrifices himself for his role.

“Now go, Acolyte Hikurina. For the sake of the new world that God is creating... For a future where humans can live without shame... Make certain you deliver that cargo.”

All I can do is nod. That’s my role, after all.

My carriage is built especially sturdy. In it is a very large ax. And within that is the one, the only... Primal Ash. Our nation’s treasure, and said to be the source of the miracle of fire. Truly, we do have control over fire magic.

I *must* make sure it is delivered.

To the fort; to the safest place in the realm of humans. On my life, I swear it.

64 The Priest Prays Silently and then Dozes Off, Visions of Fire in His Heart

Shelter the fire. Morning, noon, or night, if your heart is frozen, give it fire.

Someone is there. Beside you, behind you—even in the fire, someone is there.

-Father Felipe II-

“Hey, where are you going, Felipe? Come have a seat by the fire.”

I was wondering why he wasn't at the camp, and now I find my best friend, son Peine, with a cup of wine in hand. What is wrong with him? We will be in sight of the palace in a few days!

“It's a nice night. The eve of a decisive battle, you could say.”

“What are you blathering about?” I ask.

If we were facing elves, I might feel inclined to relax at night, but since it is vampires we endeavor to battle, night is when we must be most vigilant. We are marching against the night. With sunrise comes peace of mind, and during the day we rest. Then, at dusk, we rise and march during the night. Even for this brief respite, we have cavalry posted to ensure our safety. The rabbits, with their excellent night vision, are also on guard duty.

Morale is high; everyone is eager. For if we are met with defeat, it will spell the destruction of our species.

“Now, now. Don't look so disgusted. I'm on a special mission, I'll have you know,” he assures.

“What a bizarre thing to say. It's a soldier's duty to rest when given time to camp.”

“Ah, but while we are yet alive, let us drink. A cup for you, a cup for me.”

“And there he goes, spouting unscrupulous nonsense. Honestly... Hm?”

A cup is passed to me from the side—by Lady Kuroi, of all people. She's holding a small barrel. Ah, it must be an offering from one of the refugees.

“See? Special, right?”

“Indeed.”

I suppose I can't simply go with only one cup. I sit down.

"If you're gonna cry, now's the time," he says out of nowhere.

"That was... quite random."

"You lost most of your family recently, didn't you? Well, so did I."

"...You really have no filter, do you?"

"I assume the Willow brothers cried in private. We all have our own ways of dealing with grief."

My best friend and I pray silently, facing each other, then take a slow sip of our wine.

The combined information brought to us by a speedy horse from the fort and our scouts sent to investigate the Willow Estate paint a singular picture of the truth.

"The battle at the Willow Estate was one for the ages."

"Yes. Using the king as bait and the estate as a trap, they lured the vampires in before setting it ablaze... Three days later, it's said to still be belching black smoke."

"What a bold plan, using the king himself in a suicide mission."

"...He had a tendency to fall into despair."

"Idiot. Desperation alone couldn't take a thousand vampires to the grave with him. I'm impressed; he even managed to drag out another five hundred in order to search the ashes. We should all be so lucky in battle."

I have no words. Among the king's... my father's men that died was son Peine's father. I recall he was an earl who loved ploys and art more than anything. He would often pay me to do little things for him.

The crown prince... my older brother was killed in the chaos at the palace, and so was his brother. He was a pure and honest sort of man, not fit for earldom or the military. The guy often had to clean up his brother's messes after his pranks went awry.

Now they're gone. They're all in the flames now. Maybe if I stare long enough into this wavering campfire, I might catch a glimpse of one of their faces... The brightness is making my eyes water. I blink repeatedly to rid myself of what begins to rise.

"Let me just confirm one thing... The acolyte's cargo, is it what I think it is?"

"Yes. It was supposed to remain enshrined under the church."

"So that was the arrangement... am I getting this right?"

"I think so."

I toss a dry log onto the fire and watch it be consumed. Let that which comes and goes in my heart be like this log.

Oh, how I misjudged my father and teacher both.

What son Peine is getting at is that the king and the archbishop were colluding—the king was taking great pains to control the resignation and corruption of the ruling class, while the archbishop

was laboring to ease the despair and suffering of the common folk. As these desires became twisted while they worked to maintain the nation's order, they left behind a sliver of hope: the fire treasure, the Primal Ash. The great inferno magic that resides within it, much like the other treasures, can make miracles happen... At least, that's what's written in the holy book. It is for this reason that we pray.

Something could have happened—or been forced to happen. This might even be the reason behind God's manifestation. I can only hope this is true. It's the whole reason our present lives even exist. Such beliefs have led me here. If I didn't believe, I wouldn't have made it this far.

Entrusted with everything, only to learn the truth later... Who would be able to bear that?

"They must have gotten a taste for arson after seeing the church burn."

"There you go again... I bet it was the archbishop's idea. He used to say that he wanted to be burned at the stake."

"Ha ha, that he did. That old fart was always above us in terms of pranks."

The chaos at the palace was most likely the result of multiple plans colliding. The Starlight Band, who wished to open the palace gates to the vampires, incited the king's sister, the corrupt nobles, and the despairing citizens. However, they weren't able to completely take control, which suggests that the royal knights and palace guards held quite some influence. The king and the archbishop must have been in a panic. They considered the worst outcome, and acted accordingly. The Willows were their assistants in this regard.

I can almost see it in the flames now: a series of battles, starting in the palace. People being whipped into a frenzy and resisting. Lighting the church on fire was a diversion to allow the king and the treasure to escape to the Willow Estate. When they received word of a thousand vampires following them, the plan turned to using the king as a bait to allow the treasure to make it to the fort... The guts to make such a decision is astounding.

Their priorities were truly a prayer for the future. Such a suicidal plan, all to grant us a bit of hope... it is truly a revolutionary's mindset.

"I'm losing all lingering attachment to this world. A pity. Everyone's acting so cool," he says.

"What foolishness are you spouting? God does not bless those lives that do not wish to live."

"...I guess. Yeah, you're right. Forget I said that."

Fire is nice. It warms my cheeks, meaning there are no droplets for the night wind to chill. It also softly, ever so softly, invites sleep.

“What do we have here?” This voice... Lady Ange? Zakkow follows close behind, holding a pot. “Two loquacious men, drinking before a battle from cups poured by an Apostle? Talk about fortunate.”

“Mm.”

“Oh, I wasn’t asking for... Fine, fine. I’ll have some.”

“Mm.”

“For me too? Thank you.”

Both Lady Ange and Zakkow receive a cup as well.

We keep coming, one after another. Perhaps this is the magic of a campfire. It gathers people together, lights and warms them, and then captures their hearts... Religion and magic are mere unintended byproducts.

“Come, cozy up by the fire, you two.”

“And who made you the boss of this campfire?” Ange protests.

“Well, I made it,” son Peine replies.

“...Fire-starting techniques?” asks Zakkow.

“Yes, exactly. I’m neither a flame-resistant soldier nor a Bomber Knight; I’m still struggling to find my own path.”

“You always were a jack of all trades but master of none, going wherever your curiosity took you,” I remark.

“Felipo, is that a compliment or criticism?”

“From my point of view, you’re both equally silly. The son of an earl and a royal prince? There must be some mistake. You’re mischief-loving children in adult bodies,” Ange slaps us with her words.

“Pfft!”

Zakkow, that was cruel, spraying a mist of unsanitized wine all over us. But what can we do? Children do not choose their parents. On the other hand, parents often choose their children, which is why I ended up banished to the northern reaches of the Frontier... Or at least, so I had thought. Thinking back on it now, that might have been a strategic move as well. My siblings, save for the crown prince, were all sent to different parts of the country. I’d believed we were hostages to some powerful noble, but to think my father had thought this far ahead... No, even so, I was the only one sent north of the fort. I was just too handsome, perhaps.

“Hm, Sira’s already asleep,” points out son Peine.

“Of course she is. And you should be too,” Ange scolds him.

The departed, eh? My father and siblings... All those who bore a passing resemblance to me... were burned to ash. My teacher as well—that old man who used to sing so clearly of the holy book, and of chronicles of burning at the stake when he was drunk—is nothing but charred bones now.

“That’s right. As a soldier, you should learn from the commander

and Marius. They're resting peacefully as we speak," remarks Zakkow.

"Ah, then, is it Origis that's on patrol duty now? If we hold out, do you think he'll come?"

"Don't think of it. Riding tires the whole body out. His time lying down is precious."

Are the people I'm thinking of in these flames? Do they still burn?

"You're so uptight, Captain. I know you're petting the fluffy rabbits in secret," son Peine makes fun of him.

"Bfft!"

"Is that true?" Ange asks, sneering.

Did God watch over their final moments? Did He take in their wills?

"What are you all doing? You're so loud," says a voice approaching.

"Now Odysson's here! Come, sit by the fire."

"Mm."

"O-Oh, wine, huh? That's a treat... So, what's with the noise?"

"You'll never believe it; I know I didn't. Apparently the captain is shy."

"Wait! How did we arrive at this?!" Zakkow cries.

Will I... go there, too? Will I be welcomed in the flames when I fall in battle? One day... One day.

"Hey, the priest's looking sleepy. Whoa! Don't want to waste wine," he says as he takes the cup from my hand.

"This is why Felipo could never become a corrupt priest: just a little wine turns him into this."

"It's exhaustion. He's taken it upon himself to negotiate with all of the people that have joined us along the way."

"You there, something-Peine. Drag him to bed."

"Miss Ange, must you wound me so? Why not just say son Peine?"

"Ep! He almost dove headfirst into the fire!"

It's so strange. I feel like they're so close. It's so familiar, warm, and somewhat sad... No, lonely I guess would be more correct. I'm sure I'll remember this moment over and over in the future. And that thought... makes me lonely. It makes me want to cry.

I'm being carried away; away from the flames. To where, I do not know.

It's lonely. I'm lonely.

65 Origis Trusts the Man Who Stands at the Forefront / DDR Control Mistakes

God exists, and He is right by my side. I know this.
There... is also another god. I can feel them among the enemy.

-Origis II-

Ah... This is a battlefield, all right.

It's sharp and cold, as if an invisible thread is stretched between heaven and earth. A stinging stench is mixed in with the clouds of dust. The sky is so vast and the land so narrow; it makes one want to hold their breath. Steam rises from my horse's body. My belt, tied around my waist, is hard and hot.

This is where I belong. I've arrived at the place where Willow men must live and die.

"Form ranks!"

Whoo! Agias's orders are something else. They really strike a chord in my heart, clearing my mind. They turn a man into a soldier—that's the power his voice holds.

"Felipo, form a tight right wing with your brave eight thousand foot soldiers. Son Peine, go even further right with your three thousand cavalry. Odysson, form a line in the center with your thousand mages. Zakkow, your four thousand fireproof soldiers and familiars will form the left wing. Marius, your Bomber Knights will form up on the far left."

I see. So he doesn't intend to clash head-on, then. The right wing looks denser, but our elite are all stationed on the left. He's placing the importance on keeping certain groups together, even if it makes our strength lop-sided. That way, our formation is completely adaptable. We'll show off an imposing army while looking for an opportunity, one small opening...

"Origis, your two thousand cavalry will be our reserves. You are to remain on standby in the rear."

And there it is. This is my role: I am to stay farthest behind, yet am also required to respond the quickest. Wherever Agias deems me necessary, I will fly like a flung spear. In other words, we will ride like

the riders we are.

This is it; this is what I want. This... is all I can do. I'm not quick-thinking like Marius, nor flexible in my tactics. I'm not a great leader like Agias. Honestly, I don't love poetry or dancing either... they're embarrassing.

I am a soldier. That's all. I know this better than anyone.

I don't have a gift for government or social life like Nazarus; I couldn't stand the stench of the palace. My love for our country is middling at best. Moreover, I hardly have my father's guts.

So at the very least, I want to be bolder as a soldier than anyone else. If I can't be... then, how can I face them? I will do this. No matter what hell Agias points me towards, I will charge forward without hesitation. I will fight bravely.

“As for me, I will position in the center with a thousand cavalry —”

My role cannot be compared to Agias'. He represents not only the Frontier, but the entire north. He's also recently become the central figure of House Willow. He is the commander of our most elite soldiers, and one of the founders of our revolution. Just being the commander in this battle would be a grave responsibility, and yet he shoulders many more burdens. I'm surprised his spine doesn't snap under the pressure. Instead, he stands with absolute majesty, which speaks to just how amazing he is. I will be the first to admit, however, that his singing, dancing, and training routines are... unconventional.

He has the magnanimity to take on everything without bending. Is this not the quality of a king? Is this not what we need most now, with the human lands in chaos? He must not be allowed to die. And yet, he must stand at the forefront of our army. We require him as a representative of our wills, as a symbol of our army—the enemy needs to see that we follow this man.

“—and follow after Lady Kuroi.”

Yes, Lady Kuroi. The avatar of our revolution and hope. She looks so regal in her new flaming red battle cloak. Protected by her light rider's armor, she looks like the very definition of a warrior. I can feel my heart beating faster at the sight.

“Behold!” I wish to shout, yet my voice won't come out. “Before you stands Kuroi, God's Apostle and Hare of Flame! From the north she rode, cutting this country in two! She sits atop her immortal black horse, no sword or spear to speak of, but still unmistakably the strongest knight in all of humanity. A thousand cavalry are her sacred guards, and behind her are twenty thousand of the bravest soldiers humanity has to offer, flying a banner of flame. She is the embodiment of God's blessings; even from far away, she can set one's heart aflame!”

So what now? What now, you traitors? Their main force consists of five thousand royal knights and ten thousand soldiers, plus another almost ten thousand fully-equipped spearmen squeezed out of the palace and its neighboring cities. Large numbers, that's for sure, but...

It's just *pathetic*.

Their horses whinny and fight their reins, their spears clatter together despite there being no wind, and the ceaseless chatter among their ranks... there's nervous, and then there's this. Their soldiers' morale is so shriveled; it's like someone dumped freezing water on all of them.

I just want to grab and shake some sense into those bastards.

Defending the palace should be a soldier's honor. They should be pumped to fly their country's banner. Did they not have the gall to claim we were rebels? Stop looking so pathetic! Don't make us fight against fellow humans. Please.

Look at us: our battle lines are already formed. We're ready for an attack at any time. The sun's still high in the sky, too. We could finish this before nightfall, if we wished. Without using fire magic, to boot. That's how fragile their "formation" is—they'd crumble at the first touch.

Oh, here we go. Lady Kuroi's started to ride. Her horse's hooves clapping against the ground, she moves slowly toward the palace. She's unarmed. There're no red-black summoned warriors around her, either. Her raven hair waves in tandem with her horse's tail.

"Hold your positions!" Agias shouts.

He's right; we shouldn't move. This isn't a battle yet. Sure, we could rush over and crush them, but that would just be friendly fire. Our enemy is the vampires. Where are they? Where? An Apostle should be here—the one who brought down a mountain, like his name suggests. Surely he isn't watching from some high perch in the palace, is he? I could see that being the case. Is he content to just watch humans killing each other? I bet he is. I can almost see his smug fanged face now. After all, they do enjoy a bit of brutality.

"Mage Company, bombs at the ready!"

Huh? Agias, what are you planning? Lady Kuroi isn't stopping, either. How far is she going to go? Is this one of those "the lone rider gallops ahead" scenarios? I mean, if Lady Kuroi got serious she could cut through an army of thousands—no, tens of thousands—like a hot knife through butter... No. No, that's not what this is. These two wouldn't misuse their strength. Lady Kuroi is the symbol of humanity's hope, and Agias is her top man. They wouldn't trample over their fellow humans, even if it were to avenge their family and country.

Hope is wonderful. It mustn't come at the cost of someone else's

despair. For us humans, hope mustn't become despair for the weak and defeated. Noble, soldier, or commoner, in the end, we were all pathetic. We were crushed by the weight of the world, had our spines stripped from us, and fell into despair. Even the ability to cherish others was taken from us. We closed our eyes to the world, sacrificed, and desperately sought something good out of it. In doing so, lots of people died. Lots of people were killed. And they will continue to die, I'm sure.

I'm tired of it. So tired. We need to unite our strengths, not to kill each other, but to fight and break free from this enclosing absurdity. We need to work towards a future of hope. Isn't that right, Agias? Lady Kuroi? ...God?

Lady Kuroi raises her hand straight up. Her fingers seem to reach towards heaven. Everyone's watching, perhaps even God Himself. If she swings her arm forward, that's the signal to attack. But she wouldn't do that; that's not why we came here.

Huh? Her arm's starting to droop... Oh, she raised it again. This time, her salute reaches even higher. She stretches it upward earnestly, with all her might. What is this?

"Mage Company, aim for the sky."

A thousand Fire Shots rise into the sky, illuminating and warming us, and then scatter on the wind as cinders. It's beautiful—as bright as the sun, the pillar of flame is so tall it might even reach the heavens.

That's right. I knew you were different, Lady Kuroi! Agias! And Odysson, too. You see this, traitors? Can you feel God's presence? This is our spirit. *This* is what we wanted you to know!

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 11-

Wh-Whoa, that was a surprise. I made a slight control error and suddenly my allies shot up fireworks. Lemme just pull my right hand out of this glove controller real quick... Hey guys, it's PotatoStarch.

I couldn't help myself, okay? If you found an expensive VR machine at your front door, you'd want to try it out too, wouldn't you? We're all human. We're all gamers. I was so bored from all the marching, so I was reading the manual, which made me really excited to try it. Maybe not the headgear, but the glove controllers? I've always secretly wanted to try them. All of that led to this... Sigh. At least it happened before the battle began. When you get new equipment, you gotta practice first; I didn't become a controller and keyboard dual-wielding master overnight.

So, back to the game: the human armies are squaring off. What do I do now? I guess this is a fairly common scenario in strategy games. I could ignore it all and charge in alone, but that would ruin the spirit of things, wouldn't it?

Hm? What's this? Part of the enemy's army is running away. Wow! It's growing more chaotic by the second! Some are even running at us. They don't seem to be attacking, though. They've abandoned their weapons and are shouting surrender. That's a pleasant surprise. Okay, but you can stop trying to rush down Kuroi. Seriously, that's just scary. Oh, nice job blocking them, Sir Knight. No one's allowed to touch Kuroi.

So now both sides are in panic mode... Actually, the enemy's more in hysteria mode. A slightly noble-looking group has started attacking their fleeing allies. That's just not right. Now there's a fancy palanquin coming out and flying a big banner. Is this their general? Then I should meet them with Kuroi... no, the hot knight. Off you go! Sorry, it just seemed like that sort of event. Let's watch quietly. DDR doesn't have Japanese voices, anyway. Plus, the text is all summaries.

Well, the ordering might have been reversed, but I assume this is where both sides start arguing that justice is on their side. Talking could probably solve this without fighting, but considering the situation...

Huh? What's this on the side of my screen? A chat window? What? Isn't this a special field reserved only for the online arena? (I'm guess the package arrived?)

Huh? Uh... Excuse me?

(Why aren't you using all equipment properly?)

Is... Is this...?

(Are you stupid?)

This unmistakable feeling of machine translation...! Could it be... them?

(Please answer. Are you stupid?)

Is it you, the person who sent me that weird email and message card, and the ridiculously expensive gift—yet still manages to be infuriating? Is it you, Romanian?!

66 DDR Chat / The Officer Witnesses the Symbol of Destruction

Separate from our war, in a realm beyond our ability to see, the gods are also at war. I know this.

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 12-

A chat request! From whom I assume is the mysterious Romanian! ...I shouldn't do this. It would be insincere to DDR to use voice chat, let alone text chat during an important battle. I only have ten fingers; multitasking leads to a drop in quality.

(Nice to meet you. I'm PotatoStarch.)

But I greeted them anyways! This is common sense! This is Japanese manners!

(Who are you? Did you by chance send me an email and package?)

This might be machine translation, but I can still attempt to be polite, even to this mysterious and possibly criminal person. This is my secret to preventing trouble and embarrassment at work. See? Even the hot knight is greeting the enemy general in-game.

"As you have seen, we are the revolutionary army blessed by the Devil God Himself! His Apostle, Kuroi, Hare of Flame, who appeared in the northernmost reaches of the Frontier, is divine proof of humanity's guardian deity!"

He's probably blabbering about how we're in the right or something. Medieval-style battles have that sort of image to them. For instance, the Hundred Years' War or the Genpei War. Although the most successful people in both wars completely ignored the rules, like Jeanne d'Arc and Minamoto no Yoritomo.

"What utter nonsense you speak, cur!"

Well, well. The enemy's general seems to be an older lady in heavy makeup. I'm guessing she's the type to speak her mind with the sharpest tongue possible. Oh, and she has a parasol atop her palanquin.

"Wh-What of your little display of sparks? What of this seedy little girl? The only gods in this world are the Demon and the Dragon Gods! This is the natural order of things! Do you not even understand that? And here you are, daring to point your blades at the palace! You... You traitors!"

This type of person can be really annoying as your enemy. They never bend their own rules and can't be reasoned with... However, if you manage to make them your ally, they'll bring you sweets and stuff for lunch. As a general rule of thumb, anyway.

Hm... Either way, I'm glad she's engaging with us. It'd be... lonely if she just ignored us. It's the same way I feel about the number of comments and viewers I receive!

(Are you stupid?)

What the hell is this person's problem, though? What language is this even being translated from? Fine, I'll answer.

(I'm often called a fool for being a workaholic. Who are you?)

(You must really be stupid. Idiots often do shocking things, after all.)

This isn't even a conversation, damn it! What is this? Why do you keep calling me stupid? Sure, I might not be the brightest bulb, but I try to live right and not make trouble for anyone! All the while being crushed by the unfairness of society!

"It is not the royal family we wish to unseat! What we fight against is the unfairness of this world!" Shouts the handsome knight.

"Morons and fools, the lot of you! I-I am queen now! I stand at the apex of humanity! How dare you speak to me without even dismounting from your horse! Insolent dog!"

"We respect humanity, and thus we will not serve a tyrant!"

"Do you know who I am? Valkie blood flows through my veins! I have the right to rule! All of humanity bows to me! You should all be kissing the ground I stand on! This is as it should be!"

"Humans with the will to live as humans is 'as it should be'! The sin of welcoming in the man-eating vampires, however... That is unpardonable!"

"Silence! Silence! How dare you speak to me like that, you mere elven pawns!"

This dialog event sure is long, but that's just how it goes when talking to people who think they're better than everyone else. I'll let you in on a bit of wisdom: as long as you don't know much about who you're talking to, it's best to treat them like they're important.

(Did I do something to offend?)

(That stance is totally inappropriate for a Japanese.)

Now see here, Romanian. What am I supposed to say to that?

(Can you, a spectator with no merit, take responsibility?)

(You're using a machine translator, right? I think that's making you hard to understand.)

(Or, more likely, you have no brain.)

Hey. Hey, now! That was rude. Sure, I'm a small streamer and hardly an important employee at my company. I could quit without leaving behind a successor and they'd have no problem. ...Ugh, I made myself cry.

But at the very least, I'm sure I haven't caused any trouble to the Romanian-speaking world.

(What method are you using to meddle in the parallel world?)

Uh, parallel world? I don't even know where Romania is. West of Russia and east of France, maybe? And is this person ever going to name themself?

(Are you from Romania?)

(America knows, but you don't. You are strange.)

(Are you from America?)

("If you are fated to feast upon me and my flesh, then no matter what I do, it cannot be avoided.")

Wow, now this Romanian is seriously speaking nonsense. What is this mixture of uncertainty and nervousness? If I didn't think this person might have sent me a ridiculously expensive VR machine, would I just be irritated?

(Proverbs and quotes are interesting, aren't they?)

(Are you stupid?)

Argh! This chat's a distraction! Gotta focus on the game, so let's just close the window... I can't! FFFFFFFUUUUUUUUUUUUU!

(This is why you continue to think of it as a game.)

Just ignore it. La-la-la! Can't see a part of my monitor!

(This is your awakening, KartoffStarch.)

Who the heck is that? I'm PotatoStarch!

-Captain Jashan son Peine IV-

I'd assumed either I or Felipo would have gone to negotiate.

"The elves are common allies in these hard times! In the name of the Ewlogond Republic, they've agreed to a Wartime Military Alliance! Our goal is to fight back against the threat of the Demon God and the vampires!"

But Agias is doing pretty well. He's got real fire in his belly. This gruff soldier doesn't even need the help of an earl's son or the seventh prince to out-argue this old lady. How symbolic. Change can, at times, be militaristic. This, too, is a step on our stairway to revolution.

"Together, we have slain hundreds—no, thousands of vampires with their assistance! We have fought alongside their Apostle, Ten Thousand Bells! And in that battle, our Apostle slew Golden!"

Wow! He speaks like a charging knight, with no room for negotiations.

"Y-Y-You speak nothing but l-lies!"

"Open your eyes to reality! And then consider the future! There is no human dignity in a world where our enemies can declare we're having our final battle!"

This passion. This straight-forwardness... His majesty is palpable. Compared to him... Yep, she's done. Her complexion's gone from red to black; she's going to start foaming at the mouth soon. But that's fine. This should be finished soon.

All eyes are on them, enemy and ally alike. This tug of war over whose campaign is more righteous is pathetically one-sided. Before

my eyes, our enemies have lessened and our allies have increased. Such victories are growing in number. Soon, this squabble amongst humans will be over.

Then, the real battle can begin, just as the headliner follows the opening act. We've already got an omen of this: something odd seems to have overtaken Lady Kuroi. She hasn't moved, but I wonder how many have noticed the swords that appeared in her hands. And she's glaring at the palace.

But most of all, this aura. What is it? What is this sense of tension that makes one wish to tuck tail and run? Both armies have lost the will to fight and are watching the argument unfold with great interest... However, it's just a one-sided display. So why can I practically hear the air creaking, as if some great battle is happening? It's giving me goosebumps.

Felipo has taken notice. Odysson... Ah, yes, he's quite disturbed by it. I suppose it would be imprudent to assume Agias hasn't noticed it. Is that why he's getting more aggressive?

This isn't Lady Kuroi's mana we are sensing. This is, quite frankly, beyond the realm of human understanding.

Ugh, this ringing in my ears! Now the crowd's started to talk among themselves. It is only natural—for this situation is unnatural. I haven't experienced an overbearing, violent, and crushing aura such as this one since the battle against Golden...

Could... Could this be divine spirit? Is it, Felipo? Lady Kuroi is here, and thus, so is humanity's Guardian God: the Devil God. But then, what of the other side? What can fight against a god and release such pressure? Is it there? Is it coming from the palace?

Ah! What is that?! A giant shadow rises from the palace! Hold on a second, now. How much bigger can it get? It's orders of magnitude larger than a cyclops. On bat's wings, it takes to the skies, crushing the residences surrounding the palace, and flies toward us. Even through the palace gates, I can see its face: a horrific construct, like pure brutality.

A demon. A demon! The holy book speaks of this: the Demon God's closest servant... the avatar of destruction that leveled even the great dwarven fortress!

67 The Knight Witnesses and Challenges a Massive Evil

O Fire.
O Flame.
O Inferno.
O God.

Grant me strength. Strength enough to slay demons. Grant us fire to purge this evil.

-Knight Agias III-

My throat tightens; my heart pounds in my chest. With trembling hands, I grip the pommel of my sword. Fear overwhelms my heart. If it weren't for all the watching eyes, I would have run away by now.

Is this all you are, Agias Willow? The burden of my house's name means nothing. My desire to be the pillar of humanity doesn't change the fact that I am merely human. I'm weak. This thing forces me to face that fact.

So this... is a demon. Regenerative powers that trump even those of a troll; physical strength that makes a bugbear look like a child; savagery that scares even an ogre; massive size that looks down upon even a cyclops. Every rumor I'd heard was true.

This is a monster. Its mere presence is too much for anyone to bear.

"M-Majestic! Majestiiiiic!"

Who is that? Who's screeching like a mad man? There, in the center of the enemy army: a man dressed in black.

"Behold its might! Hee ha ha! Humans are trash! Nobles? Slaves? The palace? What of them? Every last one is meaningless! Worthless!"

A starred armband adorns the shouting man's shoulder, as well as those that surround him. So that's the Starlight Band, huh? The political organization that criticizes the throne and wishes for vampire dominance. I heard their leader might be a colleague of Felipo and Jashan son Peine.

"Everyone should die! Everything should be destroyed! It's all insignificant! In this world, everything is decided for you from the moment you're born! Children starve to death as adults grow fatter! Humans are sold as commodities! The strong eat the weak and call it

destiny! There is no such thing as fairness in this absurd world of ours! It is hideous! Repulsive! There is no value in living!”

So you wail and smile as you denounce this world, crying tears of blood?

What atrocities must have happened in his life to make him say these things? What grief drove him to gather supporters and rise to action like this? This man in black is like a symbol of the stagnant despair that plagued the south.

“Now is the time for us humans to be annihilated by the great Demon God’s power! At least our worthless lives will be taken by a divine hand! A grand end to our fruitless beginnings—”

A boulder thrown by the demon crushes the man.

But that’s not the end of it. The sky rains down giant objects; roofs, walls, and pillars are tossed about like a child’s toys. Each impact shakes the earth, thunders in our ears, and covers the sky in dust clouds. Any who are unlucky enough to get caught are mercilessly splattered into bits. Countless lives are simply erased from existence.

I cannot bring myself to move. This is akin to a natural disaster—it is not something we can fight against. Humans are trash, huh? I see. There is no honor or meaning in a death like this. It is certainly worthless.

“Higyaaaaaaaaaaaaan! Bah! Pugyawahwahwah!”

What the hell? Who’s screaming like a clown? The king’s sister, huh? She’s fallen from her palanquin and is crawling toward me, trying to get as far away from the demon as possible. Unable to move her arms and legs, she’s forced to worm through the grass and mud with her elbows and butt.

“Eek! Ahh! I’m scared! Save me! I’m so scared! I don’t want to die!”

Ah... A human. Covered in tears and snot, yet still struggling to survive... that is what it means to be human. We are weak. No matter how great our numbers or perfect our techniques, we are like candles in the wind before the tyranny of dragons and demons. Our burning souls do nothing to stave off the darkness of death. This is reality.

And that’s why I reach out my hand.

I dismount, take the lady’s hand, wipe her face with a cloth, and help her up. I look towards those who once stood opposite to me on the battlefield... and I welcome them. Let us all act as brothers. Good and evil, costs and benefits, advantages and disadvantages... Let us all put those aside for now.

We are the same. We are all weak. None of us can stand strong and proud alone.

“...Do not be afraid.” I do my best to speak, to give reassuring

words. I'm reminded of a time long ago, back when the Frontier was facing an oncoming tidal wave of monsters. My only thought had been to at least die cleanly. How sullen; how cowardly. "Despair may threaten to destroy us, but there is no need for raw fear. Behold! We are no longer alone. We are *not* abandoned."

It was from the church's observation tower that I witnessed her first battle. That raven-haired girl fought more fiercely than any man I'd ever seen. That was her beginning; that's why I can now say:

"God does exist. Let us believe in Him, pray to Him, and serve Him! God loves us, and has granted us His blessing... through her."

Lady Kuroi. No family name or history to speak of, yet here she sits atop her horse, fire magic rising from her entire body as she fixes the demon with a stare. She doesn't attempt to ride out alone, like she usually does. Instead, the rabbits surround her, thousands of sharp horns at the ready. Her shadow warriors, wavering in the light of her burning dual swords, poise to intercept.

Her back, though silent, seems to ask: Wouldst thou fight with honor? Wouldst thou fight alongside me? Wouldst thou believe in God?

Ah... The fog of fear is lifting. My sword is drawn before I can even answer.

Agiass Willow, are you a fighter? I am! My soul cries before my mind can move.

"Concentrate, men!" I bark.

The trembling has stopped; strength is rising within me. All I can do now is leave everything to my years of battle training.

"We are about to fight that demon! And once we defeat it, the Demon God—and the world—shall know of human majesty!"

Lady Kuroi looks over her shoulder at me—I can see approval in her fire-colored eyes. Yes, I will go. We are together, not alone. We shall challenge the world as one.

"Felipo, instruct your men to take any who can't fight to the rear! Then set up a base in a suitable area! Zakkow, your fireproof soldiers will enter the palace to rescue any surviving citizens! Lead them to the rear base!"

This battle must be humanity's salvation. It will all be meaningless if we cannot ensure the maximum number of survivors. We must do all that we can!

"Odysson, the Mage Company is our trump card! Position yourselves on a hill and wait for my signal! Son Peine! Guard them with your cavalry!"

Fire magic. Fire is stronger than steel against a demon. Assuming it's a higher class of vampire, while its strengths are massively amplified, it should still share the same weakness. We shall destroy it

with an inferno large enough to burn an entire army.

“Marius! Annihilate the vampires remaining in the palace! You have a thousand prey to hunt!”

My orders are rough at best, but this is fine. Marius gives me an invincible smile.

“Origis! You and I shall attack this demon in tandem! My men shall ride ahead as a disruptor, and you follow up! I expect great things from our best formation, the Inferno!”

Cheers rise one by one, eventually rousing a limitless fighting spirit. Once-slumbering morale burns bright again. Here and there, soldiers unleash battle cries. Their spirits are rising.

You see, Lady Kuroi? We are ready. No matter what your plan is, we will assist you. We will fight by your side.

“Begin!” I shout.

The demon approaches. With enormous strength, it crushes a human city underfoot as it makes its way to bring our end. Every step it takes is a massive earthquake.

But we are no longer scared. My horse paws at the ground with its hoof, as if to say, “You think this scares a war horse?”

Hmph! What was that? The demon bends over, then rights itself. Its eyes, glinting with yellow monstrosity, narrow... Its maw opens wide, revealing rows of fangs... That beast! It intends to eat humans before our eyes! What evil! Is this a symbol of the cruelty of this world?

Someone shouts. Was it me? Or was it Origis? No, it was everyone. We howl for the people who are now undoubtedly crushed in the demon’s hand, as well as for our own loved ones.

That was the first strike. A streak of fire shoots through the air like a comet, riding on our voices. It’s a spear—a javelin thrown by Lady Kuroi. Magical fire illuminates its sharp steel as it rips through the world. The distance it has to travel is far... perhaps too far. Regardless, it hits. It pierces the demon’s hand, burning its victims, and travels through the other side into the demon’s right eye. The monster unleashes a frightful scream. It almost looks pitiable as it clutches its face; shock and confusion consume the creature. Wickedness can only exist within those with intelligence.

Two things fall to the ground: One is the demon’s eyeball—it melts into smoke. The second is the ashes from its cremated victims. May their souls be at peace.

This first strike was a display of Lady Kuroi’s will. Armed with rage, she challenges this absurd world; burdened with grief, she sends off the dead... just as in days past. Then she rides ahead again, our Lady Kuroi. This Apostle speaks only with actions.

Let us follow her. Let us fight harder than we have ever fought

before. And then, here and now, we shall reverse the rules of this world.

68 Targeting and Climbing in DDR

If a demon is the vanguard of humanity's destruction, then should I—no, we—not simply defeat it?

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 13-

No way. It took damage? That means it's a real demon, and not an illusion. But why? Why a demon?

(Attacks from this range are non-standard. Consistently strange.)

Demons are the Demon God's trump card. They're above even Apostles in terms of power and standing, and are mostly used to engage with dragons. Which is why this one should be off fighting in the central plains. That's the main battlefield, right?

(So many alterations that overcome the system. In a progressive manner.)

So why here? The Apostle in the palace is Crumbling Mountain, isn't it? He can't summon a demon like Golden could or Thunderstorm can. I don't get it.

(How can someone so insignificant as yourself be capable of all this?)

Oh, man. It's coming. That giant thing, like a forced-death event, crushes a palace wall and starts its advance. It's totally targeting me. Well, I guess I did earn its ire. But, like, it pissed me off! How dare it destroy the palace?

(No, could it be...?)

I'll show you. Oh, I'll freaking show you! A sudden battle against a demon is just cruel, even for DDR. I mean, I should be emailing support right now. Even so...

(Are you really only playing a game?)

The landscape's not so bad. The open plains are good for galloping on, and there are no boulders for it to throw. The sun's height means it's just before lunchtime, too. Wait, this is smack dab in the center of human territory; obviously we're going to have a terrain advantage.

(But is it true it's only you?)

But most of all... This mana. My max mana, current mana, and recovery rate are all increased to shocking levels. Heh heh heh! The Devil God's overall faith levels are skyrocketing. My battlefield display must have really worked. Bwa ha ha ha!

(In other words, someone is...)

In other words, victory is assured! Haaa ha ha ha hah!

(...using you as a counterattack against my strategies?)

Let's go, Kuroi! First, cast Call Einherjar! Let the mana flow and summon as many as you can! Foot soldiers? Cavalry? A hundred? A thousand? Who cares! Just fight for me, please! Then I quickly put them on auto-battle. Oh! The militant rabbits have started their attack as well. Wonderful! Go, go, go! Don't think, just charge! Swarm,

swarm! Draw the demon's attention! Whoa, the demon's punch shakes the earth. One hit turned a dozen of them into pancakes. Rest in peace, my fluffy friends. Only Sakiel could have blocked that attack, and that's the Honest Abe truth.

That's why aggro management is important! Have you already lost sight of Kuroi, you demon?

(Is this an example of "if you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you"?)

Good, now I can use my summoned warriors as cover to get closer. It may be big and strong, but it's also slow, which means my soldiers can get onto its chest like—and I kinda hate to say this—fleas... Whoa! It's trying to brush them off like eraser shavings! Eek!

Oh my! A huge Fire Ray is coming this way! The Mage Company must have worked together to produce this... Aw, it got blocked! The damn demon turned its arm to stone! But it's fine. This is fine! I'm close enough. Chaaarge, Chocolate Pudding! Use Kuroi's magic to turbo-overdrive-boost! Man, this thing is big up-close; it's like a real-life giant robot!

(Or is this simply action and reaction? What a simple phenomenon that would be.)

My goal is the ankle! Running up the thigh, I imbue my swords with the power of fire, and... HAH! Did ya like that, punk? The screaming and feel of iron sinking into flesh tells me I did some real damage. Good, good! Fire magic is awesome, look how effective it is against a demon!

(This magic... and this performance... It's as if you're after my power.)

Whoa! Stop struggling! I didn't have to worry about this in my elven playthrough because I could fly—augh! It's stomping the ground and kicking up dust clouds! But don't underestimate Kuroi's lateral jump abilities! I eject from Chocolate Pudding and *hop, hop, hop*! Dodging circularly, I zig-zag like lightning towards the demon! I can practically feel the afterimages coming off of me! Taking down massive opponents is the best part of an action game!

(This KartoffStarch's playstyle is optimized as far as DDR's combat rules will allow.)

I think that weirdo just messed up my name again! Whatever, I don't have time to look at the chat. It's really flying by, but I gotta ignore, ignore, ignore!

Yes, I got on! I summon daggers into my hands and stab, then pull myself onto them. Using those daggers as footholds, I summon more daggers. Climb, Kuroi! I've climbed many dragons in my vampire playthroughs, but never a demon.

(A clever choice. Very effective.)

Th-The shaking! Agh, it feels like an earthquake! This isn't good, I can't reach the head. Fine, I'll settle for here—the 'base' of the leg. Thrust that blade in! And why stop at one? Ten! Twenty! I can keep this up all day! And they're all on fire, of course!

(This is really stoking my curiosity. How strange.)

Nice! It's retreating! Now to dive off and prepare for the landing damage... Wow, nice timing, hot knight! You're the true knight in shining armor!

(Who invited you to the parallel world?)

Dive! Whew, good catch. But don't stop! Go, go! Runnn!

"That was crazy! But impressive!"

The knights' movements are amazing, like a school of fish. They even glitter like one.

"The Bomber Knights and mages will provide cover."

We distance ourselves, watching the thrashing demon's back... Ep! Explosions! Another platoon of cavalry is ripping it apart with grenade-like things. Yes! And it's followed up by another combo Fire Shot! Is there a group of mages on that hill?

"Lady Kuroi, you do as you will."

Nice! Excellent movements! Maneuver warfare combined with covering fire on a flat plain with no vampires might be a new strategy for success! However, considering the demon's phases, *that* might be coming next.

I jump off the knight's horse and summon Chocolate Pudding under me. I gallop off at top speed, using the momentum to adjust my balance. See? The demon's emitting smoke. The stone armor covering its body crashes to the earth, and its eyes flash. I knew it. Its muscled body bulges as electricity runs along it... an extra-massive Lightning Bolt is coming! That's usually a spell reserved for named vampires, and is more like a bit of flashiness, but in the hands of a demon, it's a map-wide weapon; a weapon of mass destruction.

Not that I'm going to let that happen, though.

If you think you can just stand there without moving and charge up your thunder magic without being attacked, you must be crazy. It's careless and conceited. I've got no, no, no reason to wait around for you to finish.

So, facing the demon head-on, Kuroi aims her spear from atop her horse. Get back, my summoned soldiers. Get back! You too, cavalry. Distance yourselves. You're about to witness an attack even more powerful than the one at the beginning of this grisly battle.

Charge that fire magic... Even this sturdy spear can't handle it all and is starting to spark, but I continue to charge. It burns red-hot, but I push it further. Ten more seconds. It'll be fine; the demon still has thirty seconds left to go.

(Dragon Demon RPG, DX mode. A mysterious program that no one has access to.)

The demon's weak spot is its throat. I learned that in my elven playthrough, when Absolute skillfully pierced that spot. Now, to steady my aim...

(I made this game.)

Eaaaaaat this!

(And now you interfere with my plans.)

The spear lands dead center, then bursts into a huge ball of flame. That, combined with the failure of its own spell, makes for massive damage. How do you like that? Haaa ha ha hah! Look, the demon's like a fireworks show!

(I want to consume you.)

Brrr! A shiver just went up my back, but I gotta stay strong; I'm in the middle of a battle. If things get really desperate, I always have my empty plastic bottle.

69 The Sorcerer Struggles to Control Fire / DDR Is a Shitty Game

The Devil God howls. Humanity makes its heroic stand—the flames burn bright.

We fear no enemy, make no retreat. We will *not* lose.

-Sorcerer Odysson II-

“Did you see that? Did you see that shit? Demons? Hah!”

I’m astonished. Me, Odysson. That was some crazy magic. Not only was that giant spear blazing red, it shone as it flew through the air... I’d name it “Blazing Star” if it were up to me. The way it pierced the demon and then exploded was, simply put, amazing. Not even siege weapons have that much destructive power.

“All right. While it’s still burning, let’s launch a third blast.”

Kuroi, Apostle to the Devil God, guardian deity of humanity. You’ve always had a crazy, reckless fighting style. That demon, a monster that’s basically the end of the world, was destroying the palace, but you didn’t despair in the slightest. Instead, you challenged it head-on. We’ve gotta learn from your example. Humanity can’t accept absurdity anymore. If we get hit, we have to hit back. Don’t give up, even if it means death!

“Now! Fire!”

Controlling a thousand Fire Rays, I tighten them into a spiral and launch it skyward. It makes my brain feel like it’s gonna split, but someone’s gotta do this job, right? I’m the first human to use fire magic, damn it! My nose won’t stop bleeding... Hit! Yesss, it’s finally starting to burn nicely! The Bomber Knights are landing direct hits as well. The demon looks so stupid, getting knocked on its butt. It’s burning, writhing in pain... and howling.

Oh, screw you! Don’t cry so dramatically just because you’re huge. Stop making the world vibrate. Do you know how many screams there were when you ravaged the palace? None of their voices were heard, and I doubt they’d forgive you.

“Replace your charcoal wands! Fill them with mana!”

Humanity has been crying for eons and eons, longer than anyone can remember. Crying, raging, and dying en masse; that was our lot in life. But I’ll be damned if we’re going to take it lying down any longer.

“Don’t hold anything back! Draw out every last bit of mana you’ve got! Then pack your wands with it!”

This is all so we don’t have to be so pathetic in the future. So we can make a world where kids like Sira can live peacefully without having to fight.

Die. Die! *Die* by our hands! This is payback for years of torment. If you’re going to curse someone, curse your master for doing something as stupid as declaring a final battle.

There’s blood on my wand. The skin on my hands must have rubbed off. There’s blood in my mouth, too. Am I clenching my jaw too tightly? My head’s pounding. I’m nauseous. Everything’s cold. My vision’s blurry; I’m clearly using too much mana. The world is starting to turn red... But as long as I’ve got this burning feeling rising from the pit of my belly, it’s nothing I can’t handle.

Whoa! Was that Fire Swipe from Agias? The title “Acting Commander of the Frontier Army” isn’t enough anymore. I can’t believe he freaking cut through one of that demon’s tendons. That was dangerous. I can’t let him die, just like I can’t let Kuroi die.

Come on, give us the signal, make use of our flames. We can’t fight like you, but we still... Yes, the signal!

“Go! Release!”

Our fourth Flame Ray. It should be a spell a thousand men strong in total, but it’s not enough. It’s not nearly big or hot enough. Although I guess that should be expected; everyone has different amounts of stamina and mana. Even the things that sustain their will—long-held rage and sadness—obviously differ from person to person.

Nevertheless, our dreams are the same, and we all look up to Kuroi as our symbol of hope.

I won’t let a single ray be left behind. I won’t let even the tiniest glimmer of heat go to waste. I’ll collect them together; I’ll send them flying! I’ll twist them into a fiery screw, strong, sharp, and tight, then unleash it into the sky.

Fly! O flames of ours—a thousand burning emotions from a thousand different people. There’s your target; fly toward it without hesitation! The raven-haired Kuroi is there, staring down our enemy. We must defeat them, no matter the cost!

A cough is rising in my throat, together with the iron taste of blood. Stop distracting me, damn it! Yes! It hit! The full force of the flames is pouring over the demon.

“Heh... Heh heh... We did it, goddamn it!”

“Yes. Well done, Odysson.”

Son Peine. When did he get here? And why did he dismount from his horse?

“Sit. You need to rest.”

“Don’t be stupid, the demon’s still...”

“It’s defeated. That’s magic fire, remember? It’ll keep burning until there’s nothing left to burn.”

Hey, don’t push my shoulders. Ow! Don’t smack my butt! Damn, my knees are quaking just trying to stand. My hands are shaking, too.

“Just rest. We don’t even need the fire bombs now. Besides, Lady Kuroi and Agias have taken some distance and are simply watching now. If we leave it alone, the demon will burn to death.”

I’d tell him not to be so careless, but I don’t think it’s necessary. Despite his light tone, son Peine hasn’t smiled once yet. That’s good; the battle’s not over yet.

“But my, you sure have carved your name into history today, Odysson. The first demon killer in all of humanity. The Mage Company delivered the killing blow, after all.”

“It was on its last legs after Kuroi’s spell... *cough, cough!*”

“...You paid your price. Enjoy your spoils of war.”

“Heh... It’s just a bloody nose.”

There are still enemies to defeat. The demon may be down, but there are a thousand yellow eyes in the palace. I can hear battle cries, see rising clouds of dust and smoke. There’s going to be a lot of street fighting, which will be difficult for the Bomber Knights to handle. The fireproof soldiers are busy evacuating the citizens, too.

“*Cough...* None of the guys that went into the palace have come out.”

“Don’t worry. Zakkow is a man of the front lines who’s used to tough situations, and cleverness is Marius’ middle name. We couldn’t ask for better leaders. They’ll overcome any difficulties.” He sounds positive, but the bitter look on his face tells an entirely different story. “...Depending on Crumbling Mountain’s actions, that is.”

That’s true. The unexpected appearance of that monster, the demon, made me forget, but the yellow-eyed Apostle is still in the palace. If they choose to wade into battle, the outcome would be easy to predict.

“However, uh... a more pressing question comes to mind.” He swallows quite loudly. Is it fear, or nerves? Either way, it’s hardly manly... but I can’t laugh at him for it. What is it? I swallow, too. “As a sorcerer, I’d like to hear your opinion... What is this strange presence?”

I feel it, too. It’s hard to express, but there’s a sense of extreme evil in the air. The demon burns, but instead of feeling better, the foreboding just gets worse and worse. It’s hard to breathe, like I’m stuck between two raging storms. If I don’t focus on not doing it, I’m liable to piss myself.

“Could it... possibly be in the palace?” I ask.

“What is? The yellow-eyed Apostle? Maybe, but does that really explain this sense of dread?”

“No. No, of course not. Not even Golden gave off anything like this. Nor that demon...”

“Wait, you don’t think...”

“It is possible; Lady Kuroi has set a precedent for it.”

“The long-ears would be one thing, but the yellow eyes have an emperor... Whoa?!”

A thunderous noise comes from the palace again. You gotta be kidding me! Giant wings rise again, bat-like and membranous. There’s another one? Oh, my... Oh God! And another! Two at once? How many more are there? What the hell is going on?!

God! Guardian God of humanity! What the hell are we... What the hell is Kuroi supposed to do?!

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 14-

Uh, is that... No. No, you're kidding.

(The wrath you control is quite strong. I have lost my pride.)

Two more demons? That's just not possible. It's crazy, even for DDR standards. No. No, no! This *has* to be a bug.

(Avarice will likely not beat you either. Thus I used it to summon demons.)

Is this some kind of event? A forced bad end that's different from the Demon God appearing and laughing? That's so shitty that I'm even getting a nose bleed.

(One will head towards wrath. The other will search for the treasure.)

Huh, one demon's coming towards Kuroi. But the other... flew away? Where's it flying to?

(By the way, "To hope is to contradict the future.")

Aha ha ha... Oh, for God's sake. From what I can see on the radar, that demon just landed near the rearguard—where the fat priest is.

(And "Existence is a fight against absurdity.")

Hey, what?! The demon that didn't fly off just casually tossed a piece of castle wall straight into my fire mages! Those were rare units!

(KartofStarch. If you are the counter to my invasion, then the resistance is...)

Yeah, no. Aha ha ha! Boy, if I ever see the dev team... Ha ha ha...

(If you are the true god that gives hope to this world...)

This game is so shitty, so masochistic, so impossible, so barf-inducing... I just... can't. This has to be a joke. This can't be the end. It just can't.

(...then do something about this.)

Shut up, Romanian!

Pick up your sword, Kuroi. Fight until the end—no, fight so that this *isn't* the end. You said there was hope, remember? You declared those words to the people of the Frontier with your own mouth. Can't you remember the taste of that warm udon? So c'mon! Let's do this, Kuroi! Destroy that demon! Kill as many—okay, maybe more than a few is impossible, b-but at least kill these two!

70 Zakkow Fights Hard at the Giant Evil's Feet / DDR Special Perks

An enemy. A powerful enemy, so dangerous it threatens to take all we have.

Now. *Now* is the time. God, take all I have. Grant us the power of miracles.

-Captain Zakkow III-

"C-Captain! Captain Zakkow! It's another demon!"

"So what? Is that a reason to abandon citizens who can still be saved?" I shout, pushing a pillar out of the way. I pull out a dusty child. He's struggling to breathe, but at least there's no bleeding. A broken leg, maybe, but with a splint he should be fine.

"Okay, men! Let's move!"

I can't save many people with only fifty men under my command. Perimeter patrolling, removal of debris, protection from falling objects, carrying of the wounded, and battling the vampires... we're severely undermanned. Our position is awkward, as well. Having split up to investigate the vast palace and gather up surviving citizens, if we were to try and escape together, the vampires would easily target us. Even a single vampire would create a bloodbath. Not to mention, we could all be crushed instantly by the demon at any time.

I hear explosions. Is it fire magic? Or is it vampiric destruction? Either way, we can't allow the citizens to go near it. Gotta wait for the opportune moment to escape. For now, we've set up camps inside the large barracks by the western gate, as well as the grain storehouse by the eastern gate. Our people are holed up in there and fairly secure. Marius is out doing hit-and-run attacks as well; that should buy us enough time.

"*Sniff...* It hurts..."

"You're doing great. Really great, kid."

"Mommy... Mommy!"

"It's okay. It's okay. Leave everything to us."

Dust and ash cover the soles of my boots as I make my way down the avenue. Most of the side paths are blocked off by collapsed domiciles. I close my eyes and listen; I won't let one cry, one moan, not even the rustling of clothes escape my notice.

Augh! An ear-splitting noise, like rolling thunder. The demon is howling. So annoying. Stop it! Shut up!

“Captain, enemies! Six vampires, coming at us!”

Hmph. Separated from your main squad, huh? Bloodshot yellow eyes, fangs, drool—they’re excited. They’re ferocious beasts that will attack any human on sight.

“Greatshields, forward! Intercept!”

“Yes, sir!”

But in the end, they’re just wild beasts. The correct response is to create a wall, block them off. These things crush the weak underfoot; they are not warriors.

“Rahhhhhh!”

That’s the way. Hit them with your battle cries! Push them back with your spirit! We have citizens to protect. Don’t let your warrior’s shields waver, even if it costs your life!

“Prepare for ignition! Smash!”

With the vampires stopped, we hit them with oil bags. They burst on contact, covering them in the stuff. Even those that miss splash all over the ground. Good, now ignite! Even normal oil becomes magical when lit with mana. Thus, it works wonders against vampires.

“Time for a hunt! Forward!”

Hatchet in hand, I proceed into the fire. I drive my blade into a writhing vampire’s neck, again and again. Damn, some blood got in my eye.

“Gah!”

Something impacts my stomach. A knee? My body rises slightly in the air. The monster’s still so strong, despite being half decapitated. The difference in resilience between our species has never been more evident.

“Rahhhh!”

I drive my fist into the hatchet stuck in its neck. Once, twice, three times and it severs. How do you like that? I won’t back down, not even for a second. We are the fireproof soldiers! We receive the God of war and fire’s blessing with our whole bodies and wade into battle. Humanity’s survival depends on us.

“Anyone wounded?” I call. A few report light wounds. Two have lost their dominant arm. Battles against vampires are never an overwhelming victory for us. Our tactics may outclass them, but... we still lost one man. His head was bitten right off. I offer a short, silent prayer for my fallen brother, then quickly open my eyes. The demon’s voice rumbles.

“You men, help move the wounded. Relieve those who are still fighting. Tie them to your backs with rope—”

“Captain! More enemies!”

“Damn! It never ends!”

About a hundred vampires stand at the end of the avenue. That’s too many. It’s time for a decision. I look at my men—fire burns in their eyes. They shake their heads.

All right, we’ll make our stand here, so the citizens and injured can escape.

“Let’s do this! Let your spirits burn, so that we may continue to fight under Lady Kuroi’s command!”

Here they come, the man-eating monsters. They charge, vulgar smiles plastered across their faces. Bring it; come to us! Taste the blade of humanity!

Hm? A rumbling shakes the ground—the sound of galloping horses... Cavalry. Bomber Knights burst into the avenue via an intersection. Fifty men? Oh, I see Marius at their center. Is that his squad? They charge the vampires from the rear, ready to pierce right down the middle.

“Move to the sides! Make way! Defensive formations!” I order.

The cavalry run right through, whooping and yelling; they’re so fast and intense. Swords, spears, fire bombs, and flame canisters make up their attacks. They cut through the enemy easily.

Heh! Marius, the idiot. Of course he winks at me as he passes.

“Form a line! Shields up! Throw your fire! Make them burn and scream!”

Once the last rider is through, we form up and block off the avenue. What we lack in men, we make up for with blazing fire. Our spirits high, we draw the enemy’s attention. If they chase after Marius, it’ll be chaos; horses aren’t meant for the tight streets of urban warfare.

Then again, I suppose my concern was unfounded. I feel a fiery spirit from behind me.

“Out of the way!” shouts Marius.

House Willow’s cavalry tactics are impressive, charging again so quickly. Their blades flash as their rush of destruction commences. And then, in the blink of an eye, it’s over. The least we can do is finish off the stragglers.

“Captain Zakkow!”

“Yo, Marius. How goes the battle?”

I wipe away my sweat. If not for his help, we would have been goners. We spread out in order to save the citizens while taking out vampires, but this strategy is really testing our fortunes. Battles like this are happening all over the city.

“We’ve shaved down most of their main force, but now that thing is back.” He’s looking at the demon. We’re all looking up at it, but it never looks down at us. I don’t think we or even the vampires register

in its eyes. “The battlefield is disjointed, chaotic, and scattered. The vampires are unusually excited, as well. You could even call them crazed. I’ve heard reports of them killing each other.”

“Drunk on blood, perhaps? Or are they overjoyed in the demon’s presence?”

“...Perhaps they are sad to see just how small they really are.”

A demon is a giant monster, an avatar of violence. Yes, I see; that would certainly impress a sense of insignificance upon anyone. My hatchet would be less than a bug bite to it.

“Hmph... If that’s true, then they have no pride.”

Humans have always been powerless, but through hard work and teamwork, we have overcome our weakness to become warriors. Our wills have reached the heavens; look up, and you can see it. Yes, the demon is gigantic, but an unending volley of flames is launching at its terrible face. Spears—Lady Kuroi’s special fire magic—pierce, burn, and explode.

What a relief to see.

Take it! Take it, you evil creature! Those attacks are our rage incarnate. Behold, vampires, elves, demons, dragons, Demon God, and Dragon God—all who would belittle us—look and be afraid! This is humanity. Humans exist, and we are proud.

“Ha ha, that’s Lady Kuroi for you. Look, she’s luring out the demon again,” points out Marius.

“This is a good time to evacuate.”

“Yes, my brothers are probably on their way to assist us.”

“The eastern gate is closest. Can I ask you to take care of the western gate?”

“Roger. Good luck to you!”

“And to you!”

Run! Hurry forward—there’s no time to waste. Just a little longer. Our luck isn’t the greatest, but it can at least hold out until this operation is done. Even if our fortune does run out, there will be warriors to take our place. After all, there is a battlefield after death. Ah, how blessed are we. I can fight without fear!

-DDR Stream/VOD Part 15-

Go, Kuroi! Unleash your Spear of Rage Rush! Ha! Ha! This way, demon! And don't call me a coward, either. Whittling down a strong enemy from far away is a sure-win strategy in hard games. Brick by brick, you take them apart. It's common knowledge.

Whoa! It threw a palace gate at me. Hilarious! As if that would hit me. Chocolate Pudding easily dodges to the side. Then, I respond with another volley of spears. This is almost like a different game; I feel like I'm a lone ground fighter repelling a bunch of alien invaders.

Oh, nice! I lured it out onto the field. The quakes it's making are crazy, though. This will be your grave, demon! An open field, in the middle of the day? Obviously speed is going to win out.

Okay, use up the remainder of your magic to Call Einherjar! Come, my heroic spirits! More, more! I want ten thousand of you! Well, that might be impossible, but in my mind, that's how large my army is! Oh, and lots of cavalry, please. Then, without delay, I put them into auto-battle mode. I leave the rest to you! Should be child's play with how many warriors I summoned.

Now, hi-yo Silver... I mean, Chocolate Pudding! Away! Destroy the other demon, Kuroi! I know all of your mana is gone, so you can't recover, and that it's taking all you've got to keep your horse summoned, let alone fight... But there's a way to bring this back from the brink: this! Oh, you can't see it... Then again, I don't even know if I'll be able to publish this video, to be honest.

Anyway, it's this! My VR set; the expensive one! Does anyone see where I'm going with this? Yes, that's right. The most common of VR game conventions—a VR connection perk. Okay, I just plug it in, mess with the settings, peel off the film on the visor's screen, and... boom!

You see, VR isn't really suitable for action games. It makes people motion sick, and you can smack into a wall or desk and hurt yourself. It's just hard to use in general. The most common use for it is, well... adult stuff, you know? Obviously that would piss off game devs. Like, they pour a lot of resources into their games. DDR especially, since it's so detailed. That's why most games give VR connections special perks by default.

As for what that is in DDR, according to the strategy sites, it's a complete recovery of health and mana. Yeah, I know, kinda boring. They could at least give you an elixir item that you can use at all times. Honestly, I haven't ever tried VR before because of this; it's a common theme among the most dedicated players.

Anyway, I'm all set up now. Okay, Kuroi, I'm going to be

borrowing your vision for a bit!
Dive into the world of DDR!

71 Life and Death in the Parallel World of DDR

God has descended unto me.

Oh... May His raging spirit flow... Deus Ex.

-Devil God PotatoStarch I-

The sweet smell of grass. The strong wind blowing my hair. The sound of my horse galloping. The warmth on my cheeks. The dryness in my throat.

Mmh...? When did I fall asleep? I open my eyes. I see chocolate-colored hide and hair. Was I lying on my horse's neck? In my hands isn't the reins, but its mane. The world is going by so quickly... Green fields and a blue sky. It reminds me of my grandfather's house up in Furano, Hokkaido. I haven't been there in a while. Haven't paid my respects at his grave, either.

I hear a great tumult getting closer. No, please, I hate crowds! People are always moving one way or the other in the city. Even if I withdraw into a corner, there's no place for me; it's only awkward. That's why I liked work. While I was being helpful, there was a place for me to belong to. I like video games, too. In them, I only have to think about having fun, so it's very convenient.

However, it's hard to only have one or the other; I get restless. Living in the city is cold, which is why I need beer on top of those two things. Then, I can scrape by. Oh, but I'm not supposed to have alcohol. Gotta stay focused on DDR.

Right... Right. DDR. That weird, mysterious DX version. It required a special approach. And, last I checked, wasn't I in a sticky situation?

"Oh... WHOA!"

Shit! What is this?! What is this sense of realism? I'm totally riding a horse—we're galloping like the wind! Wah! The gear is different from what I know. The shaking of the saddle is making my crotch... What?! M-M-My body! It's Kuroi! No way... VR is amazing! It's like I'm in a parallel world. Soft cheeks, silky hair—they're all mine.

Oh! No, no, no! This is just weird! Even the most expensive VR set couldn't reproduce all this! This isn't just cutting edge technology, this is science fiction—or just straight-up fiction!

Ack! The ground's shaking? And I hear screams. Where's this horse taking me... There! It's the demon! That massive monster is raging among a retreating platoon. It smashes, crashes, and bashes... with accompanying screams. So many screams... It's killing humans—so many humans.

“Ah... Ahhh...”

That's so cruel. It's just a massacre. It's not right. Humans shouldn't be treated like bugs!

“St... Stop...”

If this were a game, it'd be fine; it would just be numbers going up and down. I wouldn't have to care, as long as the character I was controlling was fine. Even a game over can be fun once in a while. ...But I don't understand. Something's weird.

“Stop...”

There's a burning deep in my chest. It's hot. Hot. Hot! It hurts, and I can hardly breathe. What's going on? There's a saltiness... Tears? They're streaming down my cheeks onto my lips.

I can't let this continue. Logic and all that can wait! Demon, you have to be stopped! What you're doing is unforgivable. Absolutely horrid. You must... pay.

You must pay!

“I SAID STOP!”

The rage boiling up inside me gathers in my raised right hand, burning as I steady my aim. I throw—a spear of fire. But not just one, dozens. They all fly forward simultaneously like a barrage of rockets, burning bright red as they fly straight to their target. Explosions ripple across the demon's back and shoulders, followed by black smoke and a howl.

Did that hurt? It did, didn't it? Your victims were in pain, too! That's why, first, I'm going to make you hurt!

“Rahhhhhhh!”

I throw again—axes, spears, swords, sickles, knives, halberds, hatchets... every kind of sharp object I can think of, I hurl it. For every unique object I throw, a dozen more of the same follow in its wake. Hundreds upon thousands of flaming blades soar through the air. Fly straight and pierce, arc and slice—I don't care. Just go! Make that thing hurt!

C'mon, Chocolate Pudding, faster! I need more speed. Much speed! You think it's impossible? Not with that attitude! Maybe it's not physically possible, but we've got to try. Feel the heat! Good, that's the way, we're almost there. However, at this rate, we might hit someone. Jump now! Wow, that wind pressure—what crazy speed! But we're gonna make it; we won't even need a second jump. Straight into the smoke we go! I can see the demon's shoulder. There's no soft

landing, so let's change tactics... Horse Kick! Hardly any damage, but that's fine, the momentum is what's important.

A few risky hops and look, the demon's neck is right before us. Hey, demon! Name's Kuroi. You've been a bad boy. It's time to *die*!

I cast Accept Blade, summoning the thickest blade meant for piercing possible...

How did I even do that? It's very weird that this is all happening just like I want it to... but now's not the time to think about that. First, kill!

“Yah!”

Pierced! Now, pour mana into the blade! Just a little Flame Blade for flavor. I charge it with enough heat to instantly boil the demon's insides. Starting to sweat? I bet it really burns like nothing you've ever felt before. This is the rage of tens of thousands of humans! Ah, the giant's toppling; everything's turning sideways. Run, Chocolate Pudding! From a vertical falling start, slowly we start to even out. Ugh, my stomach's in my mouth! Gotta grit my teeth and bear it.

The landing! Behold Chocolate Pudding's beautiful hoofwork—Agh! The ground is pulsing! Sinkholes and spires are appearing everywhere. Earthen Wall and Stone Shield are being combined to create Stone Storm, huh? In other words, this is magic, which means my Flame Blade can cut it! Yup, one slice and it turns back to normal dirt. But... Augh! There's too many! Gotta do something about the ground itself... Hoo! Ha! Accept Blade! Swords and spears rain into the ground. Settle down, will you?

Oh, no! A spire just delivered an uppercut to Chocolate Pudding's jaw! Aw, that whinny! It must really hurt... That's enough! Come back! Damn, I pour all of my strength into the next Flame Blade and, with dual flaming swords, I pierce the ground. Phew, I somehow managed that. It sure had me sweating for a bit.

Where's the demon...? Oh, nice, it's down. What an annoyance, casting such heavy magic in its death throes.

My heart's still beating like crazy... This is more like a rollercoaster than an action game. Plus, this body—

“Is that you... Kuroi?”

How the hell did I become Kuroi? What happens if she gets hurt?

“Ah, so it was you that defeated the demon...”

A faint, familiar voice. I spin around to find the remains of a carriage. Leaning on it for support is a woman covered in blood.

“Miss... Ange?”

“Why, that's the first time you've said my name. Your voice is shaking; that's not like you.”

Her normally tightly secured hair is in tangles. Her legs are bent at odd angles. A piece of lumber or something is stuck deep in her

belly.

“I sense... Is that You, God?”

She's looking at me, yet she's not. There's no sight in her eyes.

“Thank you... Not just for Your blessing, but for fighting with us through Kuroi.”

Bright red blood contrasts with her pale white face. Her life force... her HP... that thing I used to see only as numbers, it's...

“Are You crying? So You can be angry and sad for our sakes? God... Humanity’s God... is so human.”

The warmth is fading from her cheeks, flowing out of her along with her blood. There's nothing I can do. It can't be stopped.

Is this a game? If it is, it's sick. She's human. She's a singular, precious human.

“Take this...” Summoning the last of her strength, she reaches into her breast and produces... a dagger. “I’m not strong enough to fight, but please... At least take this.”

I have no option but to take it. There's nothing else I can do.

“God, please... This world that was home to my daughter, my husband, and me... This world where Kuroi and Sira still live in...”

Her hand is losing its grip. Her life is disappearing. Ah...

“Please... bring hope... Deus... Ex...”

Ah... Ahhh...

AA!!!

72 The Priest Realizes God's Precious Gift / The Commander Observes the Battle with Demons

God's cries are our cries. Our cries.

The fire burning in the depths of our hearts billows from our mouths and sets the world aflame.

-Father Felipo III-

"Ahhhh! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Lady Kuroi's voice echoes about. What should be a sound emitted from a single person's mouth doesn't seem like it at all—an echo should not be possible here, and yet her voice overlaps upon itself endlessly.

"AHHHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Like a child's cries, it twists my heart. Like a boy's shouts, it makes my fists tighten. Like a lady's wails, it leads my heart astray. And like a beast's howls, it unnerves me. Her voice paralyzes my mind and body, making me forget who I even am. This voice could even be my own, for it contains everything that is Felipo Valkie Millennium, yet it cries louder than I ever could.

"AHHHHHHHHHHH...!"

Oh... this voice. This voice! It moves the heavens and shakes the earth. It is a thundering roar, unleashing the emotions of every human upon the world's ears.

"God..." Sira says in a hushed voice. Even she didn't manage to escape unscathed despite the spectral protection of her father. A lone tear trails down her dusty face. "God is here... He's inside Lady Kuroi, just like He used to do."

Her words ring true; no matter how absurd they might be, those who truly believe will see the truth. Her words simply trace the outline of the miracle.

Once again, God has descended upon our mortal world.

Hark, people! Pay your respects! The Apostle is the vessel for His return, and through her, He shall wield His mighty power. Lady Kuroi's body is but that of a little girl's, but oh, this overflowing godly force! It's amazing... Even a demon seems tiny in comparison.

“God... God is so kind.”

Yes. Oh, yes, how true that is. God’s heart is the sunlight that illuminates the works of man; an enveloping warmth. Like an affectionate mother holding her beloved daughter, He cradles Ange’s hands. How can we ever express our gratitude for that love and grief?

“So why... Why did He become a god of battle?”

Indeed, war does seem to be a part of our God’s ministry. The fierce flames that consumed the demons are proof of this. With fire, He smites our enemies. At the root of His warrior nature is a great rage: First, there was sadness at the woes of man, then resentment, until finally the levee broke.

“Fighting is all about hurting. It must be hard for one so kind.”

Hmm... Probably. Perhaps she has a point. Affection from those that have never experienced pain is merely superficial, and the rage of those who have never experienced hardship can sometimes be shallow. Only pitiful sentiments lie beneath the veneer of fake sympathy.

“Why is He fighting?”

And yet our God, a sensitive being, is...

“Why is He pushing himself so hard for all of us?”

I see... Ah, yes, I understand.

Truly, a divine duty. We aren’t worthy of His grace, yet God intends to accept every human indignation unto Himself. In other words, Lady Kuroi’s existence is an embodiment of His divine will. And thus... Yes, here they come, rising silently from her feet. Even in death, her black steed continues its unending ride. Then there are her reddish-black knights and soldiers who, appearing like an entourage, fight beyond the horizon of death. One after another they rise, forming an army. In their flaming eyes are tears. Perhaps they are red with blood? Or is it the fire melting something within them? Either way, it shows their fury.

“Ahhh... Ahhhh!”

Lady Kuroi’s scream resounds throughout the world, for the sake of the living as well as the dead... Her emotions, as well as God’s emotions, burn hot. Her army, too, burns with a red intensity and keeps increasing in number. Wait... Is that... Father? And if the king is here, then... Yes, I see my brother, too. He was the prince, after all. Next to him is Jashan’s little brother and father. So even in death, the family stays together, huh? Those around them in regal battle formation must be their personal guards.

Moreover, there’s this presence—this pure, awe-inspiring aura. Its size, pressure, and heat are expanding exponentially. The scale of this existence completely blows every other summon she’s done out of the water.

The holy book states that a special power resides within Apostles that allows their wishes to be fulfilled... In other words, summoning magic. Golden once stated that summoning magic is a representation of the user's worldview. The first thing Lady Kuroi sought was weapons—enough to cut through the oncoming tidal wave of monsters that attacked the Frontier. Then, during the battle with Golden, she wished for an army—so that she might drive back our terrible foe in one fell swoop.

Now, with the demons bearing down upon us, what is it you seek to summon with the power of God?

-Captain Jashan son Peine V-

Oh, how wonderful it is to sit cross-legged atop a hill, head resting on my hand, as I watch what is practically the end of the world.

“Hey, Peine. Why are you so damn relaxed?”

“The best defense is sitting very far back in a safe position, I’ll have you know.”

Odysson plods his way towards me, sleep clearly still in his eyes.

“I had the worst dream... I could swear a piece of the palace wall was flying at me.”

“Ha ha! Welcome back to our nightmarish reality, my friend.”

The second demon did in fact rip up the palace’s walls and started flinging them at us like some sort of terrible joke, killing dozens and injuring three times as many. Our morale has, frankly, bombed out.

But even so, our forces haven’t broken. Lady Kuroi is fighting at the forefront, too, so everyone is gritting their teeth and manning up. Faith can make up for a lack of skill, which explains why our ragtag band is standing its ground.

“Damn... Missed my chance to die again.”

“Don’t say that. If you died, I wouldn’t be able to go on.”

This guy’s another serious one. He sits next to me, groaning in pain. He’s clearly injured and exhausted. He should be resting.

“Well, death would be its own sort of release.”

I survey the battlefield, where the demon that ripped through our lines is thrashing about. Is this what you’d call a superb view? I believe we have the advantage. Agias Willow the hero’s tactics are ever-changing and unrelenting. He’s so fast; he makes the demon look slow and stupid. Origis isn’t so bad, either. He tends to flirt with danger too much, but he’s also making the demon falter, so I can’t be too harsh.

Even so, they’re still human, and their enemy is a monster. That beast has enough physical and magical strength to crush their speed and turn the tides of battle in one strike. But it’s okay. I can watch

without worry, for there is a reassuring army at their backs.

“Wh-Whoa... Wow, what the...?! Is this even possible?” exclaims Odysson in shock.

“Hard to believe, isn’t it? The foot soldiers and cavalry are in perfect sync, forming a complete circle of destruction. Such tactics are...”

These reddish-black warriors are nearly silent, neither shouting their names for glory nor playing war drums... yet the cunning in their tactics is clear as day. Their coordinated offense and defense is a sight to behold.

“...a hallmark of General Bandkan and his fort army.”

They’re all so gallant, battling the greatest of enemies... I can’t begin to express how envious I am. Seriously, they’re just showing off. Fighting alongside their general, they are... *were* the peak of humanity. Is there a space left for me? It feels like all I can do is sit and twiddle my thumbs.

However, I can’t join them yet. Their formation is too strict, too disciplined to accept someone who didn’t try their best to live. I have to fight, doing my best to survive before I can be considered worthy.

Hm? Their siege is dispersing. It must be a tactical choice; demons are just too strong. Even with the fire magic of the Bomber Knights, killing it is no mean feat. Any sort of vital point is far too high up. Leaping on it and climbing up isn’t a realistic plan, either.

Oh! Lady Kuroi’s returned... but something’s odd. She hasn’t summoned more of her ember army, yet it’s so hot. Her mana is raging out of control, enough to make it hard for me to breathe. Odysson’s gasping like a goldfish, too.

So, what’s the plan...?

Her summoned soldiers gather, blending into a chaotic mix, like embers coming together to form a flame. Then, that flame combines with other flames, forming an inferno. Now it’s... standing? It’s got legs and arms, and at full height it rivals the gigantic demon. It’s... an armored knight! The thousands of ember soldiers combined to form one giant ember knight. It slides across the earth, closing the distance... and then draws. A huge sword flashes through the air, slicing the demon’s torso. Flames rage across its body, as if to swallow up the shrieks of pain. The pillar of fire is so great that I think it could even consume the palace.

Ash dances on the wind... What a magnificent battle. What a stirring demon slaying.

“Legion...” Odysson manages to eke out between his puckered lips gasping for air.

Ah, I see. So this is our God’s higher familiar? Not even the holy book speaks of such a thing. The Demon God has demons; the Dragon

God has dragons; and now, the Devil God has a legion. The fact that such a fearsome being has been summoned unto our mortal plane must mean...

“This... This really is the war to end all wars.”

This isn't the time to be joking, let alone smiling. I'm shaking so much I can't even stand. Yet still, I instantly smile defiantly. I will fight gallantly, smiling the whole time. My father, brother, the General, those soldiers... they were all heroic until their last moments, I'm sure. This faith gives me the strength to fake it till I make it. I can't help it, I *must* fight!

73 The Parallel World of DDR and the Holy War Record

When I close my eyes and fall into darkness, I can sense the truth—our prayers and wishes become mana that travels to God.

-Devil God PotatoStarch II-

Dragon Demon RPG is an extremely difficult game only for masochists. In its world, hard work is not rewarded. Your destiny is decided from the moment you're born, and no amount of clever machinations will change your strength or affluence. In the end, the world is fated for destruction. This is true not just for humans, but elves and vampires as well. They're all but parts in the grand scheme of things. No one can take the lead role; fighting over it is pathetic, since this world's residents are no more than common weeds comparatively.

The game's reality was so similar to my own life that I became addicted to it. I poured hours and hours into it... and considered it a win if I managed to spend time playing without being annoyed. I enjoyed the fortunes and misfortunes. It was all just a game, after all. Pure fantasy, to be played with like a toy.

(I see. So that's your speciale, huh?)

Light yellow text illuminates the corner of my darkened VR monitor.

Speciale? Like, specialty? Who cares, my body's so heavy and tired; I can't move. I claw my way across my desk, searching for my keyboard. Oh, found it. Now, where are the J and F keys... There we go.

Summon Legion.

(I see. "I am legion, for we are many." Yes, I see.)

In a time of dire need, I somehow managed to complete my summoning magic.

(What the hell do you 'see'?) I type back.

Step one was the lesser summon magic, Accept Blade. Step two was the summon magic Call Einherjar. Step three was the greater summoning magic, Summon Legion. There were a lot of extreme power spikes in the Devil God's growth instead of a nice curve, I have to admit.

(Stop screwing around.)

But of course I could summon them. How could I fail?

(Do you think this is a game?)

If real lives are on the line, then I have to be serious. I have to try my hardest. I have to succeed at everything. Otherwise... there's no hope.

(Explain yourself. What the hell is this?) I demand.

(To me, this is revolyutsiya via invasion and exploitation of the parallel world.)

(I don't understand. What are you talking about?)

(I don't care what it means to you.)

I'm gonna throw up. Most of what this person's writing is nonsensical, but the words "parallel world" really stick out to me. Within me, something rises up.

(Did you do something funny to that VR set you sent me?)

(As soon as you connect with it, you'll be linked with my communication circuit.)

(That's not what I mean. Did you put some weird tech in it, like electric drugs that can make you hallucinate?)

("If what you see is unreal, then are you not what is unreal?" Are you stupid?)

Again with the difficult quotes. But damn, it kinda makes sense. I can still feel the weight of the swords in my hands, and smell the stench of the battlefield. I can't place exactly where I felt it, but I can recall the sensation of fire magic. And, most of all, the final warmth of a woman who was like a mother to me... remains in my heart. The wish she entrusted to me... her prayer... it's been engraved on my soul.

(You're the Demon God, aren't you?)

(Yes. And you are the Devil God.)

Unavoidably, I throw up—quite a lot. All I can do is not to hit my PC and stuff. Instead, it goes all over my legs, chair, and floor.

I'm crying. It hurts. I knew it subconsciously, but the second they put it into words... my stomach flipped.

(I'm glad. I may have lost today, but I learned a lot.)

(What's there to be glad about when you killed so many people?)

(Many things please me.) Damn you... Damn you! (For example, the "fire" I require has been prepared.)

Fire. The flame that is the source of Kuroi's power. I'm not talking about superfluous data like faith levels or magic points, either; this is the real thing. Right now, it's burning in my belly... The wills of those fighting to survive, and those who continue to fight even in death, have gathered here... A collection of souls—the flame of humanity.

(Do you even realize that this is all real?) I ask furiously.

It's precious. It's not something anyone should be messing with for

fun. Claims of ‘sincerity’ or ‘faithfulness’ only belittle it. That’s not right... PotatoStarch livestreams? Why, I...

(Another is that you have come to understand what is happening in the parallel world.)

(So you knew, but you summoned that demon anyway?)

The parallel world—the place where Kuroi and the others live. It’s not a video game; they can’t save or reload. There are no retries in the real world. A parallel world where humans, elves, and vampires all exist...

(The true battle has finally begun. It will be the final one. Massive gains will be had.)

(You’re crazy. I don’t understand.)

I want to spit out the sourness in my mouth, but I can’t, so I let it flow out along with my saliva. What a terrible smell... but it helps me stay focused, so I inhale.

(No, you are the one that is difficult to understand. It is quite likely you are an idiot.) What is with this person, this... Romanian? Are they trying to bait me? (Your PC is garbage; a low-spec, mass-produced piece of junk.)

Hmph! That doesn’t faze me. I’m already pissed, you see. ...But I’m also scared. It’s like a giant hole’s opened up beneath me. If he knows my PC’s specs, then some kind of illegal entry must have happened. He’s spied on my videos and discovered my address, too.

(Also, Dragon Demon RPG is just a game. However, it does contain a virus,) they add. A virus? Oh, so it was in the game, not the VR set... Wait, what? (I created this game based on the parallel world.)

This Romanian created DDR? So I’m talking to a member of the dev team right now? They certainly have a similar lack of humanity, but... Oh! I think there was something in the chat log...

This! (But the one you have is different. Mode DX. I did not create that.)

DX—the strange version of DDR whose contents were different from the deluxe version’s.

(It is probably a special type of magic. Either that, or a miracle,) they type. I don’t know much about miracles, but I can understand magic. It doesn’t exist in our world, but over there it does; I’ve experienced it. (You thought it was a game, didn’t you? But in the parallel world, you are a god. I imagine the local humans sought you out.)

Humans. The people living in that land are... so tragic. The elves look down upon them like livestock, and even use them to feed their familiars. The vampires see them as food as well, and eat any humans they can get their hands on. Oppressed and tyrannized, they’re a

hopelessly sad and wretched species.

...All because they didn't have a Guardian God. Without the blessing of one, they're weak compared to the elves and vampires, so they sought a god... and that's how this happened? Through the magical DDR DX, they took some random streamer named PotatoStarch and turned him into the Devil God? Ugh... I'm not gonna barf. Like hell I'm gonna barf! Just once is enough for something so pathetic.

(I had been carrying out an improper proxy war in this parallel world,) they declare. War. This isn't a game—it's real war. (Then you showed up and turned it into a proper war.)

I can't run away. I *mustn't* run away. I can't just pretend I didn't see all this; I can't let it slide. I *have* to fight.

(It is very fortunate. Our war allows me to fight the parallel world,) they continue.

Well, I'll do it. I've been trying for so long to finish the human salvation route—in other words, an end where Kuroi and all the rest can be happy. The Dragon God aside, the Demon God's attack is an unchangeable condition.

Summon Legion is my trump card, and the key to activating it... is a VR connection. However, it's not something I can use flippantly. After trying it once, I now know full well that it's not normal. It's not some special perk or bonus, but more like adrenaline in a desperate situation, or a limiter removal. It's powerful, but the backlash is equally strong. Kuroi's currently passed out, too.

But, even so...

(It is possible for us to “have a fair fight,”) they dare me.

I'm going to defeat this crazy Romanian. Through the game's strategy... as the God of war... I'll fight alongside Kuroi and the others! (...so get better. I'll send you more high-quality food.)

Ugh, that steak was his doing, too? Way too much of my personal information has been leaked.

(Thank you for the concern, but please butt out.)

(You're welcome. Still, you are unequipped to survive despite me providing you with a nourishment stipend.)

Wait... A stipend? It can't be.

(What do you mean, a stipend?)

(You should have received the proper amount in Japanese yen.)

(You're wrong, that was from my company.)

(You are affiliated with a public company, and I control the major cryptocurrencies. It was an easy acquisition.)

(You're lying.)

(It's the truth. I also control the world wide web.)

(You're lying!)

(It's the truth. I am also automatically deleting all information about you. This is to prevent any interference from third parties. After seeing your stream, I have to wonder, are you stupid?) Everything's cold. I feel dizzy. I'm gonna hurl again. (I have eliminated all potential interference in our war and protected your playing environment.)

This person's a freak, a monster if I've ever seen one. They're as fearsome in this world as they are in the parallel one, which is saying something considering they're the Demon God there.

"Ugh... Nngh! Hhrrgh!"

I grit my teeth. Moans escape, but the contents of my stomach don't. I will not barf! I'm the Devil God! I'm PotatoStarch, but I'm also the God of war. Kuroi and the rest of humanity believe in me... I will *not* be defeated by this enemy!

(Now, KartoffStarch, "let us have a fair battle.")

With shaking fingers, I press the keys. I send a sentence in reply: (I'll defeat you.)

That's good enough. I need to sleep for a bit, but I'll get up soon. And then, I'll win.

I *will* win!

74 The Knight Views and Reconfirms the Reality of a Final Battle

I may be blown away by lightning; I may be dragged to the bottom of the sea.

But I'll keep getting back up. Again and again, for as long as God's flames reside within me.

-Knight Agias IV-

It's raining. It's biting and cold, perhaps because the rain was brought on a northern wind. The thundering of droplets on my cloak is terribly similar to a cavalry march. One could even say we are besieged by this sudden rain. It turns the scene of rubble around us grey and transforms the dust of battle into mud, but it doesn't erase the smells of blood, death, and ash.

Footsteps. Someone's ascending the stone stairs. A prayer is scrawled across their hat, which guards them from the rain.

"There you are, Lord Willow."

"Father."

It's Father Felipo. He's soaked.

"Ho-hoh! The eastern gate is still in good condition, I see. No wonder the elf sympathizers made it their base."

"Mm... There are more weapons here compared to other places. The captain must have done some good work here."

"Splendid. And yet, it's ironic that an encampment set up for a civil war would prove useful to us."

Next to the gate wall, underneath the soggy mats, are reserves of spears. Up until yesterday, they were pointed at the city; that was how bad it had gotten here.

"Ironic... yes."

"This battle was filled with irony. Most of the pro-vampire nobles' territory is to the west. In other words, they were the first to be destroyed during the vampire invasion. Although, perhaps that was their hope all along."

He smirks, but there's a pain in his words. The rain manages to hide any sounds of grinding teeth. Is he thinking of all the nobles he once knew that were here? Or is he considering the many, many commoners he didn't? He could even be thinking of his family, who

are still missing. People cannot exist all alone in this world, after all.

“The Starlight Band, orchestrators of this invasion, were destroyed by the very demon they revered... The king’s sister, too, was crushed by its feet.”

His tone is filled with bitterness. According to Jashan son Peine, the leader of the Starlight Band was a colleague of theirs from seminary. How did a great student with such a passion for ideals turn out that way? The king’s sister, Inkja, wasn’t born an evil sow either. This world is just too cold and wretched for anyone to live on the complete straight and narrow path, in my opinion.

“I sense evil... don’t you?” I hear the damp yet hard sound of a fist tightening. “That battle was a bloodbath for the invaders. The vampires and even their Apostle, Crumbling Mountain, were turned to ash in order to summon the demons... which also disappeared into smoke, not even leaving bones behind.” His voice is shaking with rage and fear as he speaks. “Is there no salvation at all? It’s as if they were abandoned and made into sacrifices.”

His words cut deep. These must be the true feelings of Felipo Valkie Millennium, the man who was born a royal but became a priest.

“It makes you wonder what the purpose of this battle was,” he wonders in lamentation.

“Yes, truly. The vampires’ purpose... their goal once the battle was finished, I cannot see. I do not doubt they wish to wipe us out, and yet...”

“Maybe they wish for mutual destruction.” I hear him swallow. So he didn’t think of that, huh? Then again, he isn’t a military man. “In our many battles, I have sensed that this may not simply be settled when the vampires have dominion over the continent. We may have underestimated the words ‘final battle.’”

The vampires are crazed beasts who seek only war. Despite this, our past clashes were highly calculated, as evidenced by their cycling between offense and defense, which means we shared the instinct all living creatures have of self-preservation.

Nevertheless, after the battle at the fort, that instinct has disappeared. All they do is attack with abandon. That must be why General Bandkan chose the impossible strategy he did.

“The vampires are dead, hollow soldiers now. One could even call this mass suicide,” he adds.

The rain continues to pour, chilling the air. Is this causing any problems for the citizens we sent to the fort? Are the ones who chose to stay here getting enough warmth? Are our soldiers’ hands still limber enough to grip their swords? Pelted and drowned by rain, our fighting spirit’s fire is...

“You have to be kidding.” Heat. His voice is filled with it, and it warms my cheeks. “That’s ridiculous... Mutual destruction? That’s the source of their crazed attacks? Yes, it makes sense. Yes, I won’t deny that we may have underestimated them. But if this is true, then... Then... How disgusting! Ah, is there no salvation?!” He’s practically breathing fire now; his voice thunders into the ashen sky. “Each and every one of our lives is precious! As equally precious as the earth and sky! The histories that precede our births, the seeds of culture that appear in our lives, are all miracles! If they weren’t, then how do you explain the divine blessings?”

Plural, eh? Don’t think I missed that bit of theology.

“Our revolution is not about destroying the other species!” he continues. “What we seek is a world where humanity can be proud of itself, and respected by the other species! That is, a path to mutual respect!”

Revolution. We stood up because we sought a world where humans could live proudly. We understood that our wish would require fighting, and so we gained the power to fight toe-to-toe with the other species. An uprising from adversity; a denial of tyranny. It is not vengeance we seek, but to display our firm will.

“Our war must be a proud one! Thieves, barbarians, and fools who enjoy destruction are who we should be fighting! If not... If not... Why? Why must we suffer equally?”

The wind is howling. The insides of my cloak and hat are soaked beyond repair, so I leave them on and close my eyes. Meanwhile, the priest continues to cry out furiously:

“How are we to accept the deaths of our people?!”

Everyone is dying: the king, the prince, the archbishop, my father, my brother, my old friends at House Willow, General Bandkan, the soldiers of the fort, the men who rode alongside me into battle, my brethren who fought under the same banner... and Ange, who shared our will. Countless have been injured. Suffering has spread thickly throughout the land. Our morale is flagging; our hearts are numb, and our bodies heavy... It’s cold. Everything is unclear. Unavoidably, my eyes seek her.

Lady Kuroi, please open your eyes.

She shows no signs of injury, but she’s been in a deep, deep sleep... for three days.

“Even so, our only choice is to fight,” I assert.

We cannot delay any further; we must return the army to the fort. A renewed, united front with the elves is the minimum requirement if we are to form a new plan of attack. That’s why...

“No matter our enemy, we will fight them waving our banners with pride.”

The human nation is destroyed. Our main territory, as well as the western front, are ravaged, and with the Sacred Shield Mountains destroyed, we have no defense against the vampires' invasion. The influx of stench is sure to summon even more monsters. But regardless...

"We *will* win. Our wills united and unflagging, we shall emerge from this final battle victorious. No matter how many sacrifices must be made, we cannot back down. For we..."

I bite my frozen lips, swallow my tears, and continue:

"We are the last army of humanity."

It's a chilling, obvious fact. At this point, we have no hope of establishing supply trains. We will eventually self-destruct. Once our reserves are all eaten through...

We must hurry and settle this. We must fight, and we must win against the vampires, the demons, and the frightening Demon God that commands them.

I smoothly draw my blade and point it into the rain. The tempered, polished white blade deflects the water and the cold. Within its sharp edge resides God's blessing, miraculously clear. Beyond its tip, something translucent rises... Smoke. And not just one trail, either. They're all over, battered by the wind, yet still rising. They linger and fade, only to be continuously replaced.

At the base of each trail of smoke is life. Men and women, despite the horrors of war, are living proudly. And alongside them, fire, as well as prayers.

"What the hell are you two doing? It's pouring rain."

"...Odyssey."

I can see the exasperation in his face as he stares at us from under his umbrella. I wipe my blade, then sheathe it.

"Father, I thought you came to tell him the bath was ready? What's the point in freezing to death together?"

"Oh, you're right! The view distracted me."

A bath, huh? Another part of human life. Speaking of which, my hands are screaming from the cold.

"Remind me, who was it that said we should warm up on rainy days, huh?"

"Yes, you're quite right, quite right... Odyssey, did you come all the way here to say that?"

"There's one more thing: Kuroi's up."

"What? Truly?!"

"Is she okay? How is she?"

"Whoa, back off! Why don't you go see for yourself? She's eating some soup with Sira right now."

"Ah, so Sira is at her side?"

“I’m thinking the smell of the soup she was trying to feed Kuroi woke her up.”

As we descend the stone staircase, I remove my cloak and smile a bit. Inside, away from the wind and rain, the halls are lit with endless torches and filled with the sounds of life. And at the very center of all the noise is Kuroi. Bowls and utensils clink; she must be ordering more, though Ange is no longer here to bring her orders.

Seated around a table, we can talk and share our thoughts. This is good; this is how it should be. Precious times like these are enough to make us strong, to give us the will to fight proudly until the very end. With my faith renewed, I make a silent proclamation:

I say to you, Demon God, master of vampires and inciter of demons, avatar of fear, and threat to the entire world—we will see you soon. And we *will* defeat you.

But for now, in this irreplaceable moment, I have frozen hands to warm up.



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